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A SUNBEAM'S INFLUENCE

OR

EIGHT YEARS AFTER


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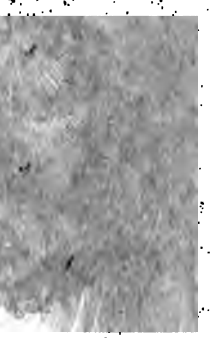


THE ACCIDENT.

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SUNBEAMS INFLUENCE:

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A SUNBEAM'S INFLUENCE.

A

SUNBEAM'S INFLUENCE;

OR,

EIGHT YEARS AFTER.

A SEQUEL TO

"LITTLE ELSIE'S SUMMER AT MALVERN,"

BY THE

HON. MRS CLIFFORD-BUTLER,

Author of "A Tale of Two Old Songs."



LONDON:

JAMES NISBET & CO., 21 BERNERS STREET.

MDCCCLXXI.

250. g. 219.

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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

TO

MY DEAR LITTLE DAUGHTER

This Story is Dedicated.

MAY SHE, LIKE ITS HEROINE,

HAVE EVER A WOMAN'S HAPPIEST GIFT,

"A SUNBEAM'S INFLUENCE"

OVER THOSE SHE LOVES.

CHAPTER I.

"I AM glad to find you up, and able to enjoy this fine evening. It seems like the first step towards recovery."

And Major Campbell leant over the sofa upon which his wife's worn slender figure was resting, well-pleased to note on her cheek the first faint flush of returning health. "We shall soon have you out of town, and in the fresh country breezes, I trust, if you get on without drawbacks. Has Mary been reading to you since I went out?"

"No; she was very kind in offering to do so, but I was a little tired after my grand toilet, and have been resting and half dozing for some time," and the sweet pale face brightened into a smile, as Mrs Campbell smoothed the soft folds of her white dressing-gown.

"And dreaming about the child, I have no

doubt. Are you missing her very sadly, poor bereaved mother?"

"No, indeed—at least I mean I have no right to do so. Your sister has been so kind in doing everything for me; but still my thoughts will wander after my little Elsie, and I find myself guessing and wondering what she may be doing."

"Dear little woman! But that it were a doubtful compliment in this hot weather, I should say that we have lost our household sunbeam. At any rate she will be safe and well cared for where she is: that is one comfort."

"Yes; Ina loves her almost as if she were her own child, and Roger is one of the kindest people living. I am sure they will be good to her, will they not, Archie?"

"Of course they will. In a very few days she will be fully established as Roger's pet, and the children's shadow, and Ina's right hand."

"But won't that be usurping Florence's privileges? I hope nothing will ever create jealousy between the two girls, they have been *such* close and dear friends for several years."

"No fear; Elsie is too unselfish and simple, Florence too high-minded, for any feeling so contemptible as petty jealousy. Be content about the child, dear Elinor, I am convinced she is both safe and happy." And Mrs Campbell tried to believe the same, as, with a smile of patient weariness, she lay back on her pillow, striving with closed eyes to picture to herself the slight form of her darling wandering amongst the green trees and summer blossoms to which she, good unselfish mother, had been so anxious to send her. Could those loving eyes have penetrated through a distance of some hundred and thirty miles, they would, just at that particular moment, have discerned, under the shade of a large walnut-tree, the small fairy figure of a girl of sixteen, with flowing chestnut hair that gave her the appearance of being still younger. Very young and slight and childish she looked, and yet there was something of womanhood already dawning in her clear broad forehead, and in the soft eyes, now so intently fixed upon her book.

Suddenly she lifted them with a smile of

bright expectant welcome, as the little terrier by her side uttered a short low bark, and then sprang forward to meet a girl, about the same age as his mistress, but who, from her superior height, dark hair, and marked regular features, appeared some years older.

"So here you are, dear Flo!" and Elsie quickly made room for her friend, who threw herself upon the bench with an exclamation about the heat.

"I hope you enjoyed your ride? Was not Herbert very pleased and proud at being your sole escort?"

"Oh yes! He was in tremendous spirits, and Donald went famously. Really, Elsie darling, you do not know the debt of gratitude we owe you for the gift of that dear good pony! Herbert would certainly break his neck on anything less quiet and sure-footed, and mamma would be in daily misery."

"No she wouldn't," said Elsie, laughing, "it's not her way. I know Aunt Ina better than you, Florence, though you have lived eight years under the spell of her influence. But I am very glad that my dear old Donald gives such satis-

faction, and doubly glad that the good old fellow has a happy home; for though I am not so *very* heavy yet, it would look funny at my mature age to go about on a wee Shetland, and I could not bear any children but ours to ride him."

"I wish you had been with us to-day. It is horridly vexatious about 'Zoë' being lame just while you are here. But you must and shall ride 'Ruby' to-morrow!"

"And take Nellie with me? Well, I'll see about it when the time comes."

"Take Nellie, of course, if you like; but Herbert is much the most amusing companion of the two."

"But it would not be fair to deprive Nellie of her turn, and really she is very good in giving up precedence generally, and Herbert has not even the right of eldership."

"Yes. How difficult it seems sometimes to believe in those two being twins. They are so little alike, and Bertie is so much the taller and stronger of the two. What a noble fellow he is growing, and so like my father."

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died, and Jock was in the house too. The two dogs had been great friends, with occasional little flashes of jealousy interrupting their alliance; but when Snow fell ill, a complete change seemed to come over Jock. He no longer tried to entice the poor little fellow to the rough play that he himself loved best, but he would go and sit by him on the rug, and look at him, oh! so sorrowfully, with his rough nose resting on Snow's silky coat. When at last my poor little pet died, and we had buried him under the weeping birch in the corner of the garden, Jock in the oddest way attached himself to me, always followed me in my walks, and would sit for hours looking at me, with such a sad wistful expression in his brown eyes, as if he were asking what had become of his playfellow. So Uncle Frank left him with me when he joined his regiment, and he has been my good faithful little companion ever since."

"I don't wonder at dogs or 'humans' attaching themselves to you," said Florence, affectionately; "but I do envy you your power of appreciating goodness in an ugly form. It is different

with me. I love, worship beauty—beauty in any form in nature—people, books, poetry. It has a fascinating power that I cannot resist, even if my better judgment warns me that the beautiful thing ought not to be loved. Well, the infatuation has done me a good turn once in my life: it was beauty that first attracted me to dear mamma, and how can I ever be thankful enough for the love that has made her my dearest closest friend?"

There was a pause, and both girls were busy with their own thoughts; but, after a while, Florence resumed—

"I am so glad that Maudie seems inclined to grow like her, since none of the older children have. Herbert has the same eyes, but he is a thorough Ward otherwise."

"Maude is a lovely child!" said Elsie, warmly. "But I suppose it is part of the 'contrairiness' of my nature that the two children that I feel most drawn to are those to whom you are least affectionate—my dear mother's godchild and little Ada."

"I hope I don't fail in affection to them,"

said Florence, hastily; "I hope—I trust not, it is the last thing I should wish, but I cannot help secretly caring most for my noble Herbert, and bonny beautiful Maude. Herbert is such a prince of a boy! and so little spoiled, in spite of everything. But, Elsie, you had a letter from Aunt Elinor to-day, or was it from your father? Oh, it is not to say that they want you back?"

"Not just yet. Aunt Mary is there—papa's sister, you know—and she takes great care of mother, and keeps her from missing me, papa says. They seem to wish me to stay on here till after Uncle Vivian and his bride come home; and if the dear mother keeps well, I shall like to do so very much."

"That is right. I have been dreading that visit, and it would be twice as bad if you were not there to help me."

"Why should it be bad at all?" said Elsie, innocently. "I shall be glad to see Uncle Vivian again; he has not been to see us since his ordination, and now there are both that and *his marriage* to think about. I think it took

mamma rather by surprise his settling at last to be a clergyman; she had never thought him practical enough."

"O Elsie, don't use that horrid word! If you knew how sick I get of hearing it from everybody, when I am in what papa calls one of my high-flown moods. Why need a clergyman be so dreadfully practical? Is it not the grandest profession a man can have, *the* one to call forth all the powers of a noble cultivated mind? It always used to make me so happy when I thought of your uncle coming home to this living, and raising the tone of the whole parish, and realising so many of the old day-dreams we have talked over together. You know how kind he used to be to me in those long vacations he spent here; and how, whenever I was out of the schoolroom, I used to go to him for advice about the books I liked best to read, and how he would read poetry to me, and explain things, and show me his own verses sometimes; and, in fact, though I was only a child, would make a sort of companion of me, because mamma was always busy with the babies, and, perhaps, in

some ways hardly suited him so well. Then, when mamma told me he was a clergyman, and papa had promised him the living here, I thought what a good beautiful thing it would be for the people, and how he would realise all the plans of improvement we had talked over together, and how he and papa would rebuild the church, and begin everything afresh on a new grand scale of well-doing. And then came this horrid marriage to spoil it all!"

"But why should you think it horrid? Amy Leigh said she saw her at Nice, and thought her so charming. She wrote me such a pretty letter before the wedding, asking me to be bridesmaid; and I should have liked to go, but mother was then so unwell that I could not leave her."

"Amy Leigh is a goose. Besides, a girl may be very charming in a gay foreign watering-place, who is very ill-suited to be a country parson's wife in a quiet place like this. By the by, what do you mean to call her? Not *Aunt* Winifred, I hope, considering she is only three months older than me."

"*Not aunt,* certainly," replied Elsie, laughing.

"I think most likely I shall call her by her pet name Winnie, the one she signed to me. It is pretty, and sounds like the pretty fair bright creature I imagine her to be. When do they come?"

"Thursday. Mamma had a letter this morning, and asked me to see about the blue rooms being got ready. I suppose they will stay with us till the repairing and furnishing at the vicarage are finished. But come, shall we go and have some of what Uncle Archie calls that demoralising five o'clock tea? I told the children we would look in, if they would keep some hot for us."

Elsie Campbell had been sent on a long visit to her aunt, Mrs Ward, in the hope that the entire change of air and scene would recruit the health and nerves which had been somewhat overtaxed in nursing her mother through a long illness. She had been always celebrated for her nursing powers, even as a little girl, when her noiseless footstep, and soft gliding ways, had won her the nickname of "mouse;" and while Mrs Campbell's illness was at its height, her father's

only comfort and dependence had been in his little Elsie, whose brave heart had never wavered, and whose clear head was always ready to attend to, and carry out, the doctor's directions. "Better than a dozen professional nurses!" the latter often remarked admiringly.

But the strain upon the mind and strength of so young a girl was becoming too much, and the invalid herself, when she began to recover, was the first to remark her daughter's pale looks, and to decree that she must have change. This Elsie opposed as long as she could, but Mrs Campbell, having once passed the crisis of her illness, grew rapidly stronger; and when Elsie found that "Aunt Mary" was ready and willing to take her place for a time, she yielded to the entreaties of both parents, and consented to go to Aunt Ina, on condition of being recalled if there should be the slightest relapse.

Many people are scarcely conscious of feeling tired until the most fatiguing part of their work is over, and the time for rest come; and so it was with Elsie. The moment the strain relaxed, her powers seemed to fail, just, as she

herself expressed it, "like a clock that somebody has forgotten to wind up," and she had scarcely strength left to enjoy the rest of mind and body, the pleasant country-life in the long sweet summer days, and the society of the dear sister-friend who was so rejoiced to welcome her. But time and Aunt Ina's judicious management worked marvels, and by degrees Elsie began to look like herself again, though at her best she was but a fragile little thing, looking, as Mr Ward said, as if a puff of rough wind might blow her away.

Mr Ward's house—"Fairleigh Hall"—stood in the midst of a very beautiful country. There was no village immediately near it, but the parish was large, consisting of a number of scattered houses, containing for the most part rather a poor population. Mr Ward was the only squire; and the living (in his gift) had been presented to his wife's brother, Vivian Mordaunt.

As soon as Elsie began to feel a little stronger, she found much to enjoy during her visit to Fairleigh.

The children, who soon made her their devoted slave, were, with one exception, just what Aunt Ina's children might be expected to be—bright joyous healthy creatures, full of life and fun. The one exception was the third, little Ada, who from her cradle had somehow been the black sheep, the one unthriving member of the family. She alone had given trouble during her teaching, and after that time had acquired a habit of whining and fretfulness, which made her an infinitely less delightful plaything than her elder brother and sister had been—she alone at the age of six was unable to read, and backward in all other childish acquirements. Added to this, a certain amount of continual snubbing (for Mrs Ward, good mother as she was, was not always strictly impartial, and Florence still less so) had made the poor child even more shy and awkward than nature intended; and her inferiority to her brother and sisters in beauty, was sufficient to prevent her from being a nursery favourite. As teacher, companion, and friend to the little ones, Florence was admirable; her step-mother leaned on and con-

fided in her, and the children thought that the whole world could not produce another "Sister;" but she was not gifted with an extraordinary share of patience, and when Ada's stupidity seemed even more impenetrable than usual, it *was* difficult to repress a sharp word, or to conceal a feeling of relief in turning from her to sweet chubby four-year-old Maude, or bold bright Herbert. The latter was, as Florence had truly said, a noble boy, gallant and truthful to the back-bone, lovable even in his very faults, which were those of a generous transparent nature, and not unfrequently reminded his mother of her brother Frank's younger days.

Little Nellie, his twin-sister, was a very different child. The nurses applied to her their favourite adjective, "old-fashioned," and even her father often called her his "little old woman," an appellation which suited her small spare frame and little airs of nattiness and precision.

She and Herbert were at heart very fond of each other, but their quarrels were violent and of frequent occurrence, one principal cause being Nellie's oppression of little Ada, to whom, with

all the impulsive generosity of his nature, Herbert had constituted himself champion. Ada's slowness, both at lessons and play, was a continual source of irritation to her sharp-witted sister, and Nellie occasionally gave herself airs of superiority which the younger resented.

Baby Maude was, as has been said, the beauty of the family, combining her mother's features with her father's sweetness of expression, and at four years old was the darling pet and plaything of all, and not yet troubled with the burden of lessons.

These, Mrs Ward, who had a prejudice against governesses, had hitherto kept in her own hands; but now that Florence was seventeen, and the drudgery of her own education finished, she was able to lighten some part of her step-mother's labours.

It was pure love for the latter that had induced her to make the offer, for Florence, although clever in many ways, had no genius for teaching; and fond as she was of her little brothers and sisters, nothing could make that morning hour otherwise than distasteful to her.

Florence's was not altogether a happy nature; it was not her way to look on the sunny side of things, or to face the little daily trials of life boldly and cheerfully.

The habit of reserve which had been fostered with those early motherless years, had never passed away; her step-mother was her dearest friend, but scarcely her confidante. Perhaps Mrs Ward, kind as she was, had scarcely softness or tact enough to win her way into a knowledge of young girls' dreams and aspirations. For Florence was a regular castle-builder, and her plans for future usefulness and well-doing innumerable; at one time wild and impossible, ranging from a mission to South Africa to an emulation of Mrs Fry, and latterly becoming more concentrated round the people and parish that surrounded her own beloved home.

For she never meant to marry, this young cynic of seventeen; the world and its pleasures were hateful to her, society wearisome, balls and parties only to be endured when her step-mother should make them a matter of obedience.

Her chief encourager in these ideas was

Vivian Mordaunt, Uncle Vivian, as, in imitation of Elsie, she generally called him. The young clergyman of five-and-twenty was little altered from the fanciful, poetical boy of sixteen, and during his long visits to Fairleigh, while reading for Holy Orders, he had found a very congenial companion in the dreamy little girl who lived so so much in a world peopled by her own imagination. He lent her books, not always within her comprehension, and certainly not of the most improving kind, for a mind so susceptible and eager after knowledge; criticised her drawings, and practised music, generally of a sacred nature, upon the schoolroom pianoforte.

Vivian had a beautiful tenor voice, and one of Florence's favourite dreams was to hear it leading from the reading-desk the faltering tones of the little village choir.

The peculiar relationship between them was quite enough to preclude what Mrs Ward called "any love nonsense" from interfering with their friendship; but Florence had sundry theories of her own as to the qualifications requisite in a *clergyman's* wife, and had long ago fixed on her

favourite friend, Mary Stevenson, the daughter of the Squire of the adjoining parish, as exactly fitted to fill that station. She had even gone so far as to hint at her wishes to Mrs Ward, who had smiled in matronly wisdom, and advised Florence not to begin match-making so early, but admitted that Mary was a dear sensible girl, and she should have no objection to her for a sister-in-law.

So this became gradually established as Florence's vision of future happiness.

The dear old church must be restored, and the choir established on a new and improved foundation, and the rectory should be the centre of all the plans for well-doing—the dear old rectory, with its ivy-grown walls and casemented windows. What a happy cheerful home it would be!—when, all at once, like a thunder-clap on all these happy visions, came the news of Vivian Mordaunt's engagement to Winifred Grey, a beautiful girl of seventeen, whom he had met at a friend's house, and fallen in love with on very short acquaintance.

Every one was startled, and to a certain ex-

tent disappointed, at the news; for it was not a good match in a worldly point of view, and Winifred's foreign education, and the admiration she had excited during her brief London season, were not the best preparation for the quiet life of an English country parsonage.

But no one felt the disappointment so keenly as Florence.

It seemed such a falling off from the idea she had formed, that a clergyman ought either not to marry at all, or to be careful to choose for his life's companion one who will be a help and not a hindrance in his sacred profession; and she felt so vexed, so grieved, to think that he should have been thus weak and easily led. She was really thankful that little Ada was sufficiently ailing to make it impossible for mother and sister both to leave home to attend the wedding, though she had some trouble in persuading Mrs Ward that it was *her* presence that her brother would most care to have, and that she (Florence) was the fittest person to be left in charge of the house and children. And when her father came back, full of the loveliness and

engaging manners of the young bride, and even her step-mother owned that though Vivian had done a foolish thing there was some excuse for him, Florence inwardly sighed, and repeated to herself that everything was vanity and disappointment.

CHAPTER II.

THERE was a wood adjoining the gardens of her uncle's place, where, during the first part of her visit to Fairleigh, many of Elsie's morning hours were passed.

To her London-wearied eyes (for Mrs Campbell's illness had detained her family in town) it was so delicious to gaze up and through the endless tracery of varied green into the blue sky above, or to watch the flickering rays of golden sunlight catching the polished leaves of Spanish chestnut, or casting a red glow on the bark of some stately oak—to note the graceful curved growth of the ferns beneath their shade, and to study the difference, "Moore" in hand, between Polystichum, Filix Mas, and its beautiful sister the Lady-fern—or to wander among forests of spreading bracken, almost as tall as herself, and people them in imagination with the elves and fairies who surely in olden times must have frequented

this wood. Very still and sweet it was, but not silent; the myriads of insects, intent on their busy play in the sunbeams, and the birds that trilled their clear notes amongst the leaves, took care of that.

There were other live things too, who partook of Elsie's predilection for the place; the little brown pink-eared rabbits who scudded across her path, and were sometimes so tame that they scarcely heeded her light footstep; the squirrels who chased each other, and played "hide and seek" round the bolls of the large trees; the glorious cock-pheasant with his glowing plumage of purple and green, who would lie crouched amongst the ferns, and then almost frighten her to death by rising up with a sudden tremendous whirr-r-r, "cocketting" loudly, as if he were the injured party.

All these Elsie loved to watch, and it almost seemed as if the very creatures knew how loving and gentle she was, for they were often almost tame with her, and seemed to consider her as a being privileged to wander at will in their native woods.

Elsie had generally a book in her hand, but I am afraid her studies here were not of a very improving nature. Who *could* take in dry history whilst the linnet was singing so distractingly overhead, and the dragon-fly fluttering its gauzy wings in the sunshine, and the ribbons of her hat becoming entangled in the long bryony wreaths that flung themselves from one young tree to another; while the fox-glove shook its crimson bells at her, and the long red thorns of the brier-roses set traps for her dress, and the pale-green nuts nodded to her out of their fringed calyx. So Elsie's severest studies here were usually of a poetical nature, and her aunt, who wanted her to make this visit a time of thorough rest to mind and body, was very well content that it should be so, especially as a day seldom passed without the two girls contriving to devote some time together to real improving reading.

It was often amusing to hear their animated discussions over their favourite books, and quarrels over their historical heroes and heroines.

Florence had established one of those books

which were so popular a few years ago, in which she collected a list of the "likes and dislikes" of her intimate friends. Of course the first page contained her own, which were as follows :—

LIKES.

Favourite Virtue,	Truth.
Flower,	Carnation.
Occupation,	Reading.
Amusement,	Music.
Hero in History,	Montrose.
Heroine in History,	Flora Macdonald.
Hero in Fiction,	Sir Kenneth.
Heroine in Fiction,	"Theodora," in "Heart's-ease."
Author,	Sir Walter Scott.
Poet,	Longfellow.
Motto,	Excelsior!

DISLIKES.

Vice,	Cowardice.
Flower,	Musk.
Occupation,	Paying visits.
Amusement,	Dancing.
Character in History,	King John.
Female do. in History,	Queen Elizabeth.
Character in Fiction,	Marmion.
Female do. in Fiction,	Mrs Nesbitt.
Author,	Macaulay.
Poet,	Cowper.
Motto,	"Let well alone."

Elsie's figured on the next page, and were these :—

LIKES.

Virtue,	Truth.
Flower,	Moss rose.
Occupation,	Reading.
Amusement,	Riding.
Hero in History,	William the Silent, Prince of Orange.
Heroine in History,	Miss Nightingale.
Hero in Fiction,	Enoch Arden.
Heroine in Fiction,	Amy, "Heir of Redcliffe."
Author,	Macaulay.
Poet,	Tennyson.
Motto,	"Every cloud has a silver lining."

DISLIKES.

Vice,	Cruelty.
Flower,	Fever-few.
Occupation,	Doing accounts.
Amusement,	Practising.
Character in History,	Philip of Spain.
Female do. in History,	Catherine de' Medici.
Character in Fiction,	Varney.
Female do. in Fiction,	Mrs Norris, "Mansfield Park."
Author,	Hallam.
Poet,	
Motto,	"Honesty is the best policy."

"Oh you terribly prosaic young woman!" exclaimed Florence, as she inspected the list.

"William the Silent! that tells a tale of recent studies in Motley, Miss Elsie; but oh! for

shame! You, a Scotch lassie, to choose Macaulay for your author!"

"I thought you would make an outcry," her friend answered smiling, "but I mean to let it stand. Those four fat volumes have afforded me too much pleasure to be treated with ingratitude."

"Miss Nightingale! Ah, yes—I wish I had thought of her. But Enoch Arden! If you must have a Tennysonian hero, Elsie, why not at least choose King Arthur?"

"I thought of him, but he is more likely to be often chosen, and I had a fancy to pay poor Enoch one tribute of admiration—brave noble unselfish heart!"

"You have made one omission in your list of 'dislikes.'"

"Yes; because I could not really hate any poet enough to write him down. Why do you condemn poor Cowper?"

"Because of those horrid long pieces I used to have to learn by heart when I was a child, before the happy days when I knew you, Elsie. I recollect 'singing the sofa,' till I grew quite spiteful towards that harmless and useful piece of furniture.

I like your motto. It is a type of your own nature—sunny and hopeful."

And so in truth it was, as much as Florence's dauntless watchword told of her own restless upward-striving longings. The Indian climate of her birth-land had not been without its effect on her whole temperament—at once ardent and desponding; and no healthier companionship could have been found for her than that of the calm sunny-tempered maiden, who, under her childish exterior, concealed powers of endurance and of action that few believed in until they had seen them called forth.

But to return to Elsie's morning rambles. These generally took place alone, while her aunt and Florence were busy with the children's lessons and other household avocations.

One of her favourite spots was a little sheltered knoll beneath the shade of a large beech-tree, which, like the monarch of the wood, stood out alone, rejoicing in the cleared space around, which afforded room for the spreading of its mighty limbs. It was a splendid tree, and the *special* pride of Mr Ward; but it had not escaped

the fate of all beech-trees, namely, that of disfigurement from the knives of the passers-by.

Nay, most prominent amongst the printed capitals were an H. W., the work of no other than the spoiled "young squire" himself, who had been seized with an irresistible desire thus to make his initials famous. Mr Ward had been very angry when he first became aware of this performance, but the head keeper, who was with him at the time of the discovery, observed, with a grin to his mate, "that there was no fear but Master Herbert would get off easy enough;" and so indeed it proved; for the boy was a privileged pet as well as a pickle, and his father forgot his displeasure in admiration of the bold fearless way in which he accepted the blame, only protesting that his sisters deserved no share in it.

The beech-tree was a favourite resort of the wood-pigeons, whose soft tender notes were amongst the sounds most frequently heard in the summer at Fairleigh; and a pair of them were now cooing a gentle duet into Elsie's ear, as she sat on the roots of the old tree, reading, for the

second time, her father's letter, received that morning. It was dated Chester Street, July 24th.

"MY DEAR ELSIE,—You were a terrible little plague for making me promise to write so often; but you see I conscientiously keep my word. I can continue to give you a good account of dear mother, who, thank God, makes steady progress each day. Dr Martin has begun the feeding-up system now, but she is a somewhat refractory patient. However, the heat is enough to prevent any one's eating, and I hope next week to get leave to take her out of town. Aunt Mary goes with us to Willowfields, so you see you need be in no anxiety about being wanted back, you little anxious woman; in fact, mamma and I both agree that it is rather a relief to get rid of your little pale thin cheeks for a time. My foolish Elsie must not take her old father's 'chaff' to heart. The fact is, darling, we *do* miss you every day and hour, but we are thankful to think of you in good hands, and in the bright healthy country, where I hope you are regaining

a little flesh and colour. Tell your uncle and aunt I am half ashamed to have sent them such a scarecrow.

"The mother sends her love, and says she hopes you are careful not to be exposed to the sun, to keep early hours, &c. I rode your little mare on Wednesday. I think she would have preferred her mistress's weight, but she carried me very nicely. The park was very empty, and in fact every one who *can* leave town has fled since the hot weather set in. I shall be curious to see your description of the bride; I hear various reports, but none that seem altogether promising for a country parson's wife. However, you will soon be able to tell. How does the uncle's farm get on? Love to them all. How many practical jokes has that monkey Herbert played on his elderly cousin?

"There! this is a longer letter than you had any right to expect, and now I'm off to the Club. Mamma is to drive out in the evening, when it gets cooler. Good-bye, little one.—Your affectionate Father, A. CAMPBELL."

The receipt of one of these cheery letters set Elsie's mind at rest for the day, and left her free to enjoy all the sweet country pleasures with which Fairleigh abounded. Only she wished she could have helped a little to lighten Aunt Ina's and Florence's labours, which, as the only ladies of importance in a large scattered parish, were numerous, and was half inclined to resent being told by the former, in a tone of authority, that she was sent to them to rest and enjoy herself, and that it was her duty to do both to the utmost of her power.

"But I am quite well!" pleaded Elsie, almost indignantly.

"Very likely, but I am responsible to your mother for your health, and I am not going to see you grow paler still, and get bad headaches teaching in that hot, stuffy school, or going in and out of cottages. I should not let Flossy do it if she were not stronger than you!"

"But I hate to sit by and be so useless!"

"Everything in good time. You have had your turn at responsibility and importance.

Now, your simple duty is to become a child again *pro temp*, and obey orders."

"Often the hardest duty of all," said Mr Ward, who had been listening, with a smile, and saw that his little guest's face expressed as much vexation as was consistent with its usual gentleness. "Papa will tell you that, Elsie."

And Elsie smiled, and the cloud cleared away, and from that time she gave her aunt no further trouble by attempts at unnecessary self-sacrifice.

There was, however, one way in which she could, and did make herself extremely useful, merely by example and influence, and this was in the management of the children out of lesson-hours. There was plenty of mutual affection between them, and added to this, Elsie's own childhood had been such as to teach her *sympathy* with children, with their characters, their little pleasures, thoughts, and griefs. In fact, as Ada was one day overheard whispering confidentially to Nellie, "Sister Flo is very kind, and plays with us whenever we ask her, if she

is not too busy, but Cousin Elsie *plays as if she liked it herself!"*

This, perhaps, was the real secret of the influence that Elsie and all like her obtain over the little quick-observant minds of children.

Then her gentleness had checked many a rising quarrel, her unselfishness shamed Nellie out of many a little act of tyranny to her juniors, and her ever-cheerful tones charmed away many a whiny complaining sound out of Ada's voice.

They loved her so dearly, and clung so much to her companionship, that any one less generous than Florence might perhaps have been jealous to find her own years of devotion forgotten or set aside for the sake of so much newer a friend.

CHAPTER III.

"VISITORS! Tiresome, tiresome visitors!" quoth Nellie, one afternoon, as a merry game of play under the great walnut-tree was suddenly cut short by a summons for Miss Campbell to the drawing-room. "Now we shall have no more fun, for we can't play 'The Elements' without you. Herbert will count so fast, and Ada is so stupid."

"Hush! never mind," said Elsie, good-humouredly, "I am sorry too, but it can't be helped, and we must not grumble. Perhaps it is just as well, Maudie was getting tired of sitting still, weren't you, little one? Play something that she will understand better. I will try and come back when the visitors are gone."

But, Miss Maude, who was too well used to be petted and paid court to by strangers, and to have her beauty admired in ill-judged audible

whispers, popped her hand into Cousin Elsie's, and trotted along by her side.

"What! you coming, Maudie? No, no, you had better stay with Nellie, and play. Mamma won't want you."

"I think, Miss," observed the maid, "my mistress would like all the young ladies to come in. 'Tis Mrs Stevenson, and she always asks to see them."

"Oh bother! tiresome woman," ejaculated Herbert, with a bound over the sunk fence into the meadow; "she won't catch me coming in," and he rapidly disappeared, leaving Cousin Elsie laughing, Ada casting rueful glances after him, and Nellie, with her little head very erect, observing that "it was very rude of Herbert; he ought to like Mrs Stevenson, for she had been very kind, and had asked them all to such a delicious tea in the hay-field, not long ago."

At the hall-door "the young ladies" were seized by nurse, to have their hair brushed, and frocks shaken out, before going in to "see company;" and Elsie, feeling rather shy, proceeded to the drawing-room, where she found a good-

natured elderly lady, and a plain sensible pleasant-mannered younger one, whom Florence eagerly introduced, as "My friend that you have heard of, Mary Stevenson."

Miss Stevenson smiled, and held out her hand cordially to her friend's friend, saying that she already knew her from Florence's description.

"I hope it was a correct one," said Mrs Ward, looking up. "We all know that Flo's descriptions are apt to take their colouring from the tone of her mind."

"I think it was not far from the truth," Miss Stevenson answered, smiling, and recollecting, as she looked up into Elsie's blushing countenance, how Florence had once, in a fit of poetical enthusiasm, described her as like a morning in early spring—all sweet cool freshness, with the brightness hidden underneath, but ready to break out.

"We hope to send her home with a little more strength and colour," continued Mrs Ward; "she has been over-done of late, nursing my sister, who has been very ill."

"Indeed! I am very sorry," and many inquiries after Mrs Campbell followed from the elder lady, which were suddenly interrupted by the younger.

"Mamma! don't you remember the Captain Campbell that Charlie was always telling us about? I am almost sure"—— and, turning to Elsie, she asked abruptly, "Was not your father in the Crimea, and in General Scarlett's division?"

"Yes; he was in the Scots Greys," Elsie answered, colouring, as she always did, with pride, when the scene of those deeds of romantic valour on which she so loved to dwell was mentioned. She looked up eagerly, while Miss Stevenson continued—

"I thought so. I have a cousin in the Enniskillens, a thorough Irishman, all fire and rattle; but he has always a graver tone in his voice when he speaks of that charge, and of Captain Campbell's kindness to him during many weeks afterwards, when he was laid up with a severe wound. Did you ever hear your father mention him—Lieutenant Kennedy?"

"Oh yes!" cried Elsie, as she recollected how many a time her father had spoken of the gallant Irish boy, who, with a ball through his shoulder, and a bayonet wound in the thigh, had seemed insensible to pain, faintness,—everything but glory and honour, as he dashed on to the attack, cheering his men, and spreading on them the infection of his gay dauntless Irish spirit.

"Well, he is my cousin, and he is coming to stay with us soon. I should like you to meet him, and hear him talk of your father."

"He and my young brother Frank must fraternise," said Mrs Ward. "You know Frank is in the Guards now; but he is only a soldier of peace, and terribly envious of those whose commissions came in time for 'better luck,' as he calls it."

"You are expecting your eldest brother soon, are you not?" said Mrs Stevenson. "There is great excitement in the neighbourhood to see the bride, the fame of whose beauty has preceded her."

"Yes, she is very pretty," Mrs Ward answered, carelessly; "I hope you will come and

dine with us, and meet them. The Vicarage is so overrun with work-people, that it will be some time before they can get settled there."

The children came in, and were petted and made much of by the visitors, who soon after took their leave. Almost as soon as they were gone, Mr Ward looked in, "Girls, I'm going down to the Farm, do either of you like to come?"

Both Elsie and Florence sprang up, and the children begged to go too; but Mrs Ward noticed that her niece looked pale, and demurred at her attempting to walk any more.

"Then she shall ride Whitenose, mamma," pleaded Ada. "We can catch her in half a minute; do, please, let her come, it's twice as much fun when we have Cousin Elsie."

Whitenose was a dear old donkey, lately become the especial property of Maude and Ada, since the twins had been promoted to a pony.

"Well, if she does that, and papa promises to take care of her, I don't mind. Maudie, my darling, it will be too late for you; stay with mamma, and we will go and get some roses."

Whitenose, who was always ready to come at the children's call, was saddled accordingly; and Elsie, though secretly very cramped and uncomfortable on the children's saddle, would not for the world have said a word of complaint to spoil their pleasure in taking care of her. She was a mere feather-weight for her age, and the donkey walked away as gaily as if she had been carrying one of the children.

In the garden they found Herbert, who had been hanging about to watch for the departure of the visitors.

"Papa, may I get the dogs?" and receiving ready permission, he ran off and returned with three happy bouncing barking creatures, in addition to Elsie's inseparable "Jock."

There was a large black silky-haired colley, with tan waistcoat and paws, and tan spots over its large, dark eyes; a wistful-looking gentle dog, very lithe and graceful in its ecstatic bounds around its master; a brown curly good-tempered clumsy water-spaniel, the children's especial favourite, as it would submit to any amount of teasing and caressing, and was

never tired of fetching sticks out of the water; and a white smooth-haired English terrier, with a sturdy independence of character that made him only gracious to Mr Ward, and, in a minor degree, to his son, while he treated the female members of the family with sublime indifference. The party being thus complete, they set out, the two little girls escorting Cousin Elsie, Florence with her arm in her father's, and Herbert and the dogs making excursions backwards and forwards, and running over the same ground a good many unnecessary times.

"You 've never been to the Farm, have you, Cousin Elsie?" demanded Nellie. "That seems quite funny when it is so near; but to be sure, it has been too hot for you to go beyond the garden or the wood. Isn't Whitenose a dear old thing?"

"Yes," said Elsie, smiling, as she stroked the long velvety ears of her humble steed; "do you know this puts me in mind of my own young days, and the first time I ever rode a donkey."

"When you were at Malvern, staying with grandpapa? And that was how you got Tom

Higgs? oh, do tell us about it, all over again, cousin!"

And Elsie began the story which they had already heard so often, and it lasted until they had almost reached the gate of the Farm.

It was a large picturesque old manor house, formerly the residence of the owners of Fairleigh, but it had not been considered grand enough by one of Mr Ward's predecessors, who had built the present mansion, and allowed the old one to fall into disrepair.

When Mr Ward had rather unexpectedly inherited the property from a distant relation, he had partially repaired the old manor house, put his bailiff into it, and converted it into his home farm.

Florence and the children were very fond of it. They liked the old gray stone walls with the vine covering half one side, and embowering the casement windows, the tiled roof half hidden under the golden lichen, the large garden surrounded on three sides by a mortarless wall, and on the fourth by a closely-clipped yew hedge, with an arched entrance, formed

by two yew-trees on each side of the swing gate.

Then they dearly loved the irregular old-fashioned garden (it was much better, Herbert averred, than their own beds of geraniums and heliotropes at home), with its heterogeneous mixture of potato and strawberry beds, currant-bushes and scarlet-runners—varied here by a gnarled old pear-tree, famous for its delicious jargonelles, and there by a York and Lancaster rose-bush, gay with blossom, the sweet-williams of varied hues, from deep maroon to pale pink, and the tall fragrant white lilies, near which stood the bee-hives, little Maude's terror and Nellie's delight.

"Isn't it jolly here?" cried Herbert. "I wish we lived here always. Cousin Elsie, you must come and see the pigs. There is one little black fellow that knows me quite well, and always grunts when he sees me."

"Elsie has a soul above pigs," said Mr Ward, laughing. "She does not like their neighbourhood. Don't victimise her."

"Oh, but," said Nellie, earnestly; "do come, papa's pigs are not a bit like other people's.

They are all clean and smooth, with such beautiful black coats and pointed ears."

Under these inducements, Elsie dismounted, and while the children fastened up Whitenose in a place where she could graze comfortably, Mr Ward took Elsie the grand round of his farm buildings. She was charmed with everything, even the pigs were, as Nellie had said, exceptional pigs, and much cleaner and prettier than their brethren in general; and nothing could be more delightful than the rick-yard with its wealth of sweet-smelling hay in great thatched ricks—the cart-stable where the big horses were leisurely enjoying their evening meal, and having their shaggy manes combed and legs rubbed down by the waggoner—and the long troops of cows who were just being dismissed from milking, stately shorthorns, snowy white, or speckled roan, with one or two fawn-coloured mild-eyed Alderneys.

"There's 'Jenny,'" cried the children, rushing towards one of the latter, and rubbing the gentle creature's forehead and ears, to her evident satisfaction.

"Ah! those are Mrs Matthews' favourites," said Mr Ward. "I keep them for dairy use to please her, but to my mind they rather spoil the look of the herd. Would you like to go into the house, Elsie, and see the dairy, and rest; or will you come a little way, and look at the crops?"

Elsie begged to go on, and passing through a grass paddock, where an old mare was enjoying her liberty, with a frolicsome long-legged foal to keep her company, they entered a field of just ripening barley, which was bending in long silvery waves under the evening breeze.

"This is fairly promising," pronounced Mr Ward; "but the next—ah me! I wish I had taken Matthews' advice, and laid it down to grass."

He pointed to a field of wheat, where the thinness of the golden ears was accounted, and, to inexperienced eyes, perhaps atoned for, by the rich profusion of scarlet poppies, blue corn-cockles, and wreaths of white bindweed and small pink convolvulus, climbing round the unlucky corn-stalks.

"Oh what a pretty field!" Elsie could not help exclaiming; but her uncle turned upon her in mock indignation.

"Spoken like a Londoner, Miss Elsie! I gave you credit for better taste. Ask Flossy there. She will agree with me in thinking that compound of gay colour absolutely ugly, when it is so out of place."

"No, no, papa! I cannot go as far as that, good farmer's daughter though I am. But while you go on to look at the peas, which won't interest Elsie, she and I will go and talk to Mrs Matthews, and inspect the dairy."

Mrs Matthews, the bailiff's wife, was a tall fresh-looking bustling woman of five and forty, so clean herself that Elsie was not surprised at the spotless appearance of the stone-floored kitchen, and of the cool shady dairy, where the great red earthenware pans contrasted with their white and rich pale-yellow contents.

"I always feel like a cat when I come here," said Florence. "Mrs Matthews, this is my cousin, Miss Campbell, who is come to us to be

made fat by drinking plenty of your good cream."

"I am sure, Miss, I hope it will do you good," said the bailiff's wife, looking with kindly interest at the small pale face and slight figure of the young stranger. "Would you like to walk up-stairs, young ladies, and see the cheeses? The girls are just setting them out in the big room."

"We will go up," whispered Florence. "I don't know that you will care about the cheeses, but I should like you to see the youngest girl, she is so pretty, and was for a long time my pet Sunday-scholar."

So up-stairs they went, into one of the big deserted rooms, where Elsie admired the size and depth of the huge oak beams.

Two maidens were busily arranging the long rows of round smooth yellow cheeses, and as they looked up and curtsied at the young ladies' entrance, Elsie had little difficulty in guessing which was her friend's favourite.

The elder girl, who seemed about twenty, or a year or two older, was like her mother, tall,

robust, and stoutly made, with a round good-humoured face, and a pair of honest gray eyes, which met a stranger's gaze with a mixture of frankness and modesty. There was, however, something decidedly rustic and commonplace about her, and Elsie's eye rested with more pleasure on the younger sister, a pretty blithe-looking creature of seventeen, with laughing blue eyes, an apple-blossom complexion, and a figure that many a London belle might have envied.

"Good morning, Maria. What a splendid collection of cheeses your mother has made this time! Well, Jessie," and Florence turned with her brightest smile to the younger girl, "how does the reading go on? I am afraid you have not much time now, there is so much dairy-work to be got through."

"Well, Miss," said the elder sister, looking with a kind of fond motherly pride at the pretty Jessie, who blushed and played with the strings of her apron, instead of answering—"we tries to spare her all we can, mother and I, for mother says it 's a pity there shouldn't be one scholar in

And she beckoned to Herbert, who was delighted to ride with "sister," and settled the matter by running off to order the ponies.

"And now," said Elsie, cheerily, when she and the three little girls had watched the pair off, "who likes to come with me?"

"I," and "I," and "I," cried the three voices; for a walk with Cousin Elsie was always made delightful.

"Get your hats, then, and Ada shall be my little maid and fetch mine. And Nellie, dear, suppose you catch Whitenose, and we can 'ride and tie,' so that Maude may not get tired."

Whitenose, who was quite sufficiently one of the family to enjoy a ramble in the fields, as well as her little mistresses, was soon ready, and they set off.

But Elsie found the strain upon her powers greater than she had expected. It was one of Ada's fretful days, and she was inclined to resent Maude's having first possession of the donkey; and Nellie made her worse by her dictatorial manner, and provoking display of superior goodness and unselfishness.

Elsie felt tired, and began to wish she had stayed at home. However, she had thought her aunt looked fagged and weary all the morning, and knew that of late she had not been so strong as usual, and that the expected visit of the young Mordaunts was likely to be a tax upon her. This being so, Elsie knew that the best way of helping her was to get the children happily disposed of, and leave her free to rest, or to enjoy the yet greater treat of a drive alone with Mr Ward. So, true to her maxim of meeting a trial, whether little or great, Elsie put aside her wish to finish the last canto of "Gertrude of Wyoming," towards which she had been casting longing glances all the morning, and cheerfully devoted herself to the amusement of her three little tyrants. A soft-spoken word or two to Nellie had banished the disagreeable conceit and uppishness out of her voice; a playful little joke beguiled Ada out of her fretfulness, and by the time they had reached the great pollard oak in the second corn-field, all were as bright and merry as could be.

Maude was lifted off, and Elsie sat down in

the shade, holding the extreme end of Whitenose's bridle, that the latter might confine her grazing to the hedgerow and its immediate neighbourhood, while the children were told to see how many different kinds of wildflowers they could find to take home.

"And gather them with long stalks, mind," added Elsie, mindful of sundry little stumpy bunches which had been brought to beautify her room, but which had caused her infinite trouble to arrange with anything like grace of form. While they were gone, she sat and mused with eyes half-shut, yet conscious all the time of the dreamy beauty of the deep blue sky and waving corn, of the twitter of the yellowhammer over her head, and the comfortable monotonous sound of the donkey grazing beside her.

How strange it would seem to see Uncle Vivian a clergyman and a married man! Would he be much altered, she wondered, and grown grave and fatherly like Mr Vincent at home, who was Elsie's ideal of a clergyman.

But he was so young! only five and twenty.

It would surely be difficult for the people to look up to and revere him as they ought.

And this unknown wife, about whom everybody talked so much, and nobody seemed to know anything, except that she was very pretty; would she be worthy to be Aunt Ina's—Elsie's own mother's sister-in-law?

She did hope Florence would like her, as they were going to live so near. Florence always liked pretty people, and report said that Winifred was lovely; surely that would be a help. Elsie's musings were cut short by the return of the children, who came running back laughing and out of breath, eager to throw their spoils into her lap, and see her dexterous fingers arrange them in picturesque confusion in the basket she had brought on purpose. There were great powdery heads of meadow-sweet, and tangles of purple vetch; honeysuckle with rosy buds and fragrant yellow blossoms, already drooping, from being squeezed in the little hot hands; golden-rod and St John's wort; tufts of sturdy flea-bane, lilac scabious, and a few scarlet poppies, found amongst the corn; hawksweed,

tormentil, long festoons of white bindweed and convolvulus, and of the shining heart-shaped leaves of the bryony; and herb-robert with scarlet leaves and aromatic little pink blossoms; blue hare-bells trembling on their thread-like stalks, and some pink blackberry blossoms, in getting which Ada had scratched her fingers, and thought herself very heroic for suppressing a cry. As Elsie arranged them, she told the children the names of the flowers, adding some little fact about each, which she thought likely to remain in their memories.

"You are always finding out pretty things for us, cousin," said Nellie, looking with great admiration at the basket, which was now completed, with the addition of some long feathery grass, and a few sprigs of young oak leaves, the brown-pink hue of which blended very prettily with the gayer colours.

"Come and sit by me, and rest," said Elsie, "and I will show you some more pretty things, if you can have a little patience."

The children nestled round her, and she pointed out to them five or six little partridges

crouching amongst the corn, and hardly to be distinguished from small tufts of brown earth; a hare sitting erect, with long ears back-turned, and paws stroking its whiskers; a black-capped titmouse, and some of its pert little blue relations, hopping about in the branches overhead; numbers of white and tortoise-shell butterflies, enjoying their short life in the sunshine; a lark, so far above their heads, that though they could hear his joyous notes distinctly, he looked like a speck against the sky; and finally a great dignified bumblebee, flying homeward laden with spoil, in what Nellie called "his black velvet jacket, trimmed with sable."

"It 's like the story of 'Eyes and no Eyes,'" said Nellie, eagerly. "We 've often been in this field before with nurse, but I never noticed all these things."

"Well, you will look out for them another time," Elsie replied; "but just look at the length of Whitenose's shadow, and even little Maude appears a giantess. Yes, it is as I thought, getting late. Don't you begin to think of tea-time?"

They set off homeward, and reached the house just as an empty fly was being driven away from the door.

"They are come, then!" exclaimed Elsie; and full of eager curiosity she hastened to the drawing-room, followed by Nellie and Maude. Ada had been seized with a shy fit, and escaped to the nursery.

Tea was in the drawing-room, and Mrs Ward presiding over it; and in a low chair beside her sat her brother, looking, as Elsie saw at one glance, just the same Uncle Vivian as ever, pale, dark, and thoughtful. Florence, still in her habit, was making conversation rather stiffly to a lady who sat by her on the sofa, and who, of course, must be the formidable bride. She was very young-looking, and might have seemed Florence's junior, but for her more matronly dress, which, though pretty and bridal, did not quite suit Elsie's taste. There was something about it a little showy and fanciful, as was also the arrangement of her very beautiful and luxuriant golden hair. As to her face and features, it needed but one moment's investigation

to make sure that "everybody" had for once not exaggerated their praise.

From the deep blue eyes, with their varying expressions from arch merriment to shy gravity, to the small delicately-formed mouth and chin, it would have been hard to find anything to criticise. Added to this, the tall graceful figure, and tiny hands and feet, made her new aunt one of the fairest objects on which Elsie's eyes had ever rested.

Elsie had entered so softly as to be unobserved during the children's noisier introduction, and she had thus time for her inspection before her uncle looked up and saw her. "Why, Elsie, mouse-like as ever! I had been wondering what had become of you. I think you *are* grown a little this time; but not so much as my other small nieces here. Here, Winnie," he continued, turning to his wife, "here 's another of the younger generation for you: Elinor's daughter, you know."

Mrs. Mordaunt came forward, and returned Elsie's kiss with tolerable heartiness, glancing, meanwhile, with some curiosity, at the little

figure in the cool summer dress, carrying the large basket of wildflowers. The latter were admired and commented on, and Nellie held forth eagerly upon the wonders Cousin Elsie had been showing them.

"I hope," said Vivian, when the children had been dismissed to their tea, "that you will be content now, Winnie. You must know, Ina, she has done nothing but complain, since our marriage, that all my relations are so elderly, and it was in vain I represented that everybody cannot stand still at seventeen, however willing they might be to do so. But now she has these two young ladies to play with, I hope she will be satisfied."

"How absurd you are," said his wife, laughing; "I only said it was a pity I was so young myself—not eighteen till next birthday. And so, please," she added, turning impressively to Florence and Elsie, "you won't call me aunt, will you? It does sound so elderly, and I have always been 'little Winnie' at home, the youngest of the family. Pray call me Winnie."

They promised acquiescence, and Mrs Ward

then rose to show her sister-in-law her room, Florence following with an expression that Elsie very well knew was meant to disguise impatience and vexation.

CHAPTER V.

THE visit of the bride and bridegroom was the beginning of a new era at Fairleigh, scarcely so pleasant as the quiet time that had gone before. Elsie could not repress a feeling of secret uneasiness the very first evening, as she sat in the bow window of the drawing-room, and her Uncle Roger came in first, exclaiming at his own lateness and that of others.

"I was detained down at the Farm," he said, "and I was afraid you would be all waiting; but I suppose brides are privileged to be extra late. What do you think of the new relationship, Miss Elsie?"

"She is very very pretty," began Elsie, with some hesitation, and then she was interrupted by the entrance of Mrs Ward, in what her husband called her "severe dress."

It was really a very handsome black silk, with

lace trimmings; but it was not becoming to her dark hair and eyes, and, now that she was looking languid and unwell, made her appear older than she really was. She was a very handsome graceful woman, but the remembrance of her ten years seniority to the blooming bride made her feel old, and disinclined to take any pains to look otherwise.

"Dear me!" said Mr Ward, as Florence followed her step-mother into the room, "I wish they would come." And his impatience increased as he noticed his wife's tired looks, and the hands of the clock showed that it was long after their usual dinner-hour.

"Perhaps she has not got her things unpacked. It is difficult to dress the first evening after a journey," Elsie ventured timidly to suggest; but Florence answered, with some asperity, that unpunctuality was always uncivil, and, in another person's house, amounted to positive rudeness.

Her indignation would have been tenfold increased could she have looked into the room up-stairs, where Winnie, seated before her dressing table, was comfortably reading a novel, while

her maid re-arranged her beautiful hair, and, with taste such as only a Frenchwoman could boast, fixed a single white rose behind one pretty ear.

The door into the dressing-room adjoining presently opened, and Vivian looked in.

"Nearly dressed, I hope? My dearest, indeed you must make haste; this is a very punctual house. Yes, very pretty," as she turned her head to let him judge of the effect. "But, pray, Julie, make haste and finish your handiwork," and he disappeared into his own room, while the maid remarked with a smile that Monsieur was always impatient, but no one cared so much about seeing Madame well dressed. And after all, there would be plenty of time; Miss Ward did not go to dress till after Madame had begun.

"That proves nothing," said Vivian, re-appearing; "I have known Florence dress in ten minutes or less. That white dress is charming —now *are* you ready?"

"One moment, darling," and the pretty creature cast a well-satisfied glance at the fair

vision in the looking-glass, while her maid clasped her bracelets, and fastened round her neck a blue enamel locket, on which her own and her husband's monograms were intertwined in pearls.

"C'est bien, Julie. Now Vivian, I really am coming," and she put her arm in her husband's, and they went down together, while the maid followed to the head of the stairs, and, peeping over the baluster, pronounced complacently that "Madame était parfaitement mise."

"Here you are," exclaimed Mr Ward, forgetting his vexation at the delay, as he came forward in his kindly way to greet his new sister-in-law.

"I believe dinner is quite ready," and so saying, he led her at once into the dining-room.

How lovely she looked as the light fell on her bright young face and glossy hair, and on her white dress and ornaments!

The two girls exchanged glances, but Elsie feared that the expression of Florence's eyes, though full of a certain kind of admiration, was not altogether satisfactory.

The conversation rather lagged, for the bride was the only sprightly member of the party, and she was a little over-awed by her new relations, and especially by Mrs Ward.

Vivian, too, was not at his ease; he was anxious to see what impression his wife would make, and inclined to resent any want of attention to her, while at the same time very desirous that she should appear to the best advantage to his sister, for whose judgment he had a profound respect.

Mr Ward did his best to make himself agreeable; but he was tired with waiting for his dinner, and uneasy about his wife's fagged and wearied looks.

Florence sat for the most part silent, with her eyes on her plate, except when she lifted them for a quick stealthy glance at the lovely face opposite to her.

"We had a travelling companion to-day in a friend of yours, at least so Vivian said," remarked the bride, turning to Elsie, who sat on her other side, and seemed the least formidable of the party.

Elsie looked puzzled, and her uncle laughed, and explained that it was the little brown mare which she had been expecting from London.

"She is a pretty little thing," he added, and seems as quiet as a lamb, not a bit afraid of the engine and noise. But she isn't as showy as her mother, my dear old 'Ladybird.' Ah Winnie! she was a beauty! I wish she were young and sound enough to carry you now."

"Have you got her still?" inquired his wife.

"No, Roger was good enough to have her here turned out to grass. You shall go and see her to-morrow."

"Ah! you must get me something to ride," observed Winnie, with the complacency of one who knew her "must" to be law.

"Are you very fond of it?" Elsie inquired.

"Yes, devotedly, if I have a horse I like. Indeed, I used to hunt, and should like to do so still, but," with a side glance at her husband, "some people think that is an amusement beyond the reach of parsons and parsonesses."

"These young women will be delighted to show you the country," said Mr Ward, nodding

to his daughter and Elsie; "and we must contrive to mount you, until Vivian can find something."

"Oh!" said Elsie, "you shall ride 'Brunette' the day after to-morrow. I am sure you will like her, but I suppose she will want one day's rest after her journey."

Winnie thanked her, and accepted the offer with a readiness which made Florence set her down as selfish, as well as flighty and vain, and Mrs Ward soon left the dining-room.

"What a delicious moonlight night," said Mrs Mordaunt, going to the open window, and looking out on the bright patches and long dark shadows which checkered the garden. "Do you ever take a stroll after dinner?"

Elsie pronounced herself at her service, and said she would run for two shawls; while Winnie, laughing at her precautions, stepped out on the terrace, declared it was as warm as possible, and invited Florence to join her. The latter glanced at her step-mother, saw that quiet would be the best thing for her, and went out.

The gentlemen presently joined them, and all

five loitered about very pleasantly in the sweet cool air, revelling in the delicious fragrance of the roses, and of a large clove honeysuckle that climbed over the south side of the house.

"I declare!" said Mr Ward, presently, "there is the glow-worm that Flo insisted on my bringing home to show the children last Saturday. I never thought the birds would have spared it so long."

"So it is," said Elsie, stooping down to look at the little gem of pure green light; "how pretty! I daresay," she added, addressing the bride, "you have seen Uncle Vivian's verses about a glow-worm? He wrote them a great many years ago, when he was quite young, but I always liked them so much. He said the glow-worm was like hope—

> "A little steadfast gleam of light,
> Calm shining through the darkest night."

"No," Winnie answered, "I don't remember them. His last performance in that way was some lines on the sunrise, which he went to see from the top of Snowdon, during our wedding tour."

"Ah, you used to be a great hand at that sort of thing," said Mr Ward, smiling at his brother-in-law. "Not quite so much time now, eh, Vivian? How will sermon-writing and poetising get on together?"

"Oh!" cried Winnie, naïvely, "*does*n't it seem funny to think of his getting up to preach a sermon? I am sure I shall feel inclined to laugh."

She did not mean a shadow of harm by her gay thoughtless words, and was quite unconscious of the effect produced on two of her hearers.

A shade passed over Vivian's face, visible even in the moonlight, and though he tried to laugh it off, he had never been conscious of so strong a feeling of annoyance with his wife. Florence just glanced at her, and her eyebrows drew into the contemptuous curve that Elsie had learned to know so well, while she murmured something about "mamma," and soon afterwards made her way back to the house. The others lingered in the garden till tea-time, after which Winnie was seized with so violent a

fit of yawning, that her husband spoke apologetically of their long journey, and Mrs Ward was glad of the excuse to propose an early retirement to bed.

When Elsie reached her room, after smiling at the impressiveness with which her aunt mentioned nine o'clock as their breakfast hour, she found Florence there instead of her maid.

"I hope you won't mind," the latter said, "but I told Keith to go to bed, and said I would undo your dress. I want so much to talk to you, and get myself into good-humour."

"I am too sleepy to put any one in good-humour," said Elsie, laughing, and suppressing a yawn. "Winnie's drowsy fit has infected me."

"It was less drowsiness than boredom," Florence answered, shortly. "O Elsie! you may talk as you like about making the best of things, but isn't it miserable to see your uncle, who was made for better and greater things, tied down for life to that silly frivolous girl, and to think of what will become of the parish in such hands!"

"But, after all, *she* is not to be the clergyman," said Elsie, soothingly; "and very likely he may raise her mind to a higher tone by his influence."

"No, no; he is infatuated—entirely governed; one may see that. And she—it is easy to guess what her ideas of reverence must be, after that flippant speech about the sermons. It ought to be her proudest thought that her husband should be chosen for such an office."

"I think you judge her a little too harshly," said Elsie, thoughtfully; "she may be silly—I daresay she is, and she has been spoiled and made much of for her beauty—but I did not see any harm, or anything irreverent in what she actually said."

"You never see harm anywhere, unless it comes beneath your very eyes," answered Florence, impetuously, then turning back to throw her arms around her friend's neck. "Elsie, I am a wretch to be so cross to you; forgive me, but I am out of spirits and worried to-night. I don't like mamma's looks, and I can see papa

is anxious, and this visit seems to come as an additional tax."

Elsie softly laid her hand on her friend's shoulder, and directed her eyes to an illuminated scroll that hung over the mantlepiece.

"As thy day, so shall thy strength be."

"That is the real thing to rest on, dear Flo, in all worries, little or great. I used to look at that so often, through darling mother's long illness, when I, too, felt as if all my powers were getting worn out, and my senses numb from the constant pressure of anxiety. There was no need to look forward; all that was wanted was just strength to get through the one present day, and that always seemed to come. Like that parable we used to be so fond of—about the old clock that complained of the terrible burden of all the 'ticks' he had to make, and was told that he had always a second in which to make each 'tick,' and that was all he needed to trouble himself about."

"You dear good little sunbeam," said Florence, kissing her; "you always do me good.

I never could bear lecturing from any one else. But I mustn't keep you up any longer, or you won't be fit to be a sunbeam to-morrow. Good-night, dearest."



CHAPTER VI.

MRS WARD did not come down to prayers the next morning, but she was in the breakfast-room soon after nine, and looked annoyed, though not much surprised, to find that her brother and his wife had not yet appeared.

Vivian, however, soon came down full of apologies, and Winnie followed in about a quarter of an hour, and looked so pretty and bright in her fresh morning dress, that no one could have grumbled at the delay.

"You have a nice croquet-ground here," she said, going to the window after breakfast, and looking out upon the garden, with which she had only made partial acquaintance the night before. "I daresay you play a good deal?"

This was addressed indiscriminately to Elsie or Florence, but only the latter answered.

"Not much; we have not a great deal of time."

Winnie's great blue eyes opened wider. "Not time! Why, what else is there to do in the country?"

The question seemed to Florence unworthy the trouble of answering; she turned away in silent contempt, and left it to Elsie to reply good-humouredly—

"You will soon find out, when you have lived here a little longer;" while her Uncle Vivian, who was nearer than she thought, put his hand on his wife's shoulder, and smiling, said that he hoped, in a very short time, she would not be puzzled for occupations.

"Oh! but," and the pretty face assumed a very decided pout, "you don't want to make a regular Goody—a village Lady Bountiful of me? Dear Vivian, you promised; and since this place has existed so long without a model parson's wife, it surely can go on a little longer! Please don't ask me to go visiting stuffy cottages, and teaching stupid children."

"You shall not be asked to do anything you

yourself do not think right and best," he answered, soothingly; and then meeting his sister's eye, and feeling that Winnie was not creating a favourable impression, he hurriedly proposed a stroll.

Should they go and visit the Vicarage, their own new home? But Winnie was in a wilful mood, and out of temper at his recent suggestion. She would not go to the Vicarage, at least not till by and by, when the air was cooler. She was tired, and did not want to walk at all—would stay at home, and read a novel. And finally, having seen him go off alone to visit his new house, and see what progress the workmen had made, she grew still more restless, was injured at his leaving her, and at last appeased by Elsie's accepting her challenge to a game of croquet.

Florence, in the meantime, attended to the children's lessons, as usual; but even there it seemed as if the opposing influence had been at work, for the little heads were running on the pretty new aunt, and the attention distracted by the click of the croquet-balls under the

window; Herbert was careless, Nellie pert, and Ada stupid and fretful.

By the time they were dismissed, Florence felt worn out, and in spite of her last night's resolutions, more inclined to quarrel with her general lot than ever.

After luncheon, Mrs Ward drove her sister-in-law to the Vicarage, whither the gentlemen had walked down to meet them. The inspection passed off pretty well; the house was in a more forward state than they had expected, and Winnie, though amused at the old-fashioned furniture, which was unlike anything her experience had ever met with, vouchsafed to pronounce it a comfortable old place, and to admire the grand expanse of view, and still more the delightful old fruit-trees in the kitchen garden, of which Herbert proceeded to do the honours. She had not taken much notice of the other children, but there is a certain bond of sympathy between all spoiled pets, and Herbert had been much fascinated by his pretty young aunt, and was intent on making himself agreeable to her.

So when his mother had driven her home, he

took her for a general inspection of the stables, and thence to the paddock where Whitenose and Donald abode, and was much flattered by her admiration of the latter. He then proposed a visit to the Farm, promising to show her "all sorts of jolly things."

Winnie laughed, looked at her husband, said she was tired, then suddenly yielded, and was setting off under Herbert's guidance, when the latter espied, to his horror, a carriage coming up the avenue.

"Visitors," he cried, in a tone of dismay, which was re-echoed by his younger sisters, while Florence dismally observed to Winnie that they must expect to have all the world coming to pay their respects to the bride.

"Then it will be all the more fun to disappoint them," said Winnie, merrily; and almost before they could guess her intention, she was running off; the children on either side of her shrieking with delight, and the sound of her own clear silvery peals of laughter floating back upon the breeze—a very child herself in the enjoyment of fun and mischief.

Herbert, who had hitherto looked upon Aunt Winnie in the light of a fine lady, was perfectly enchanted at her sympathising with his own detestation of morning callers, assured her she was a "regular brick," and promised endless delightful sights at the Farm.

Meantime Nellie, with greater prudence, whispered, "You had better stoop your head, Aunt Winnie, and then perhaps they won't see you," for the carriage was now close to them, and it was not very dignified for the rector's wife to be seen scudding away from her first visitors.

But Winnie was now full of the enjoyment of the joke; so she bent her pretty head low, and followed Nellie's example by creeping behind the trunk of a great elm-tree, and peeping stealthily out to see if the enemy were still in sight.

"All safe now," whispered Herbert, and off they started again, bursting in so suddenly upon the astonished Mrs Matthews, that she could hardly believe her eyes that this bright flushed girlish-looking creature was really the rector's wife, and Maria's future mistress.

"It seemed the more strange," as she afterwards told her husband, "because Mr Vivian was such a grave quiet young gentleman, and always spoke civil, but so distant-like."

Herbert showed off the garden and the bees, and Bess's puppies, and the pigs; while Nellie conducted her aunt through the dairy and cheese-room, and they then all adjourned to the yard, where Jessie and the cow-boy were just about to begin milking.

Nothing would content Winnie but she must try to milk a cow herself; she was certain she could, she had done it once at a syllabub party at Nice; she was sure that pretty dun creature with the gentle eyes would let her try. And in a moment she had obtained possession of Jessie's milking-stool, tossed off her hat, which, with its ostrich plumes and bright-throated humming-bird, was, as Herbert said, far too swell for the country, slipped her rings on to Nellie's careful little fingers, and applied herself to the task with, like most amateurs, far more energy than skill. The much-enduring "Jenny" showed no symptoms of impatience, except by once whisk-

ing her tail across her tormentor's face, and thereby nearly carrying away with it one of her long gold ear-rings, and provoking a scream from Jessie, a yet broader grin on the cow-boy's face, and shouts of laughter from the children.

At last Winnie arose discomfited, yielding her throne to Jessie, who quickly performed her task, and looked, it must be owned, nearly as pretty as the lady, and infinitely more skilful.

Herbert then took his aunt to inspect the swallows' nests under the eaves of the cow-house roof, and tried to get her a good view of the dear little young ones, with their steel-blue heads and white waistcoats, peeping out at the entrance.

They were then joined by Elsie and Florence, who told them the visitors were gone, and asked Winnie if she had spoken to her new maid, and how she liked her looks.

"What, the pretty little milkmaid?" inquired Winnie, eagerly; "she is charming, and in a nice print dress, and one of the delicious caps that Julie will make her, will be quite a bijou in the house. Really, I am delighted to have

found anything so charming in the country; I scarcely expected it."

"But it is not her, but her elder sister that mamma has engaged for you," Florence reluctantly explained. "She thought Jessie too young and inexperienced, and that you would be likely to find her troublesome therefore."

"I don't see why," Mrs Mordaunt answered, pouting. "And I do not at all fancy that dull, clumsy-looking girl, the elder sister. If I am not to have Jessie, I will choose a parlour-maid elsewhere for myself; perhaps have one sent down from London."

"Please give poor Maria a chance first," said Elsie, pleadingly. "My aunt really engaged her subject to your approval, and it would be such a disappointment and mortification to the poor girl. Besides, she is very good and conscientious, and would, I am sure, try to do her best, and improve with a little teaching."

"Which Julie will not be at all disposed to take the trouble to give her," said Winifred, ungraciously. "Well! so let it be; but she will, I am convinced, wear clod-hopping shoes,

put the springs of the window-curtains out of order every time she draws them, and break my pet egg-shell china by merely looking at it. So, Mesdemoiselles Elsie and Florence, you may consider yourselves responsible for the first damage done to the Rectory's domestic peace of mind."

"Query the first?" observed Florence, in a sarcastic whisper, as they pursued their homeward way, and in the second field overtook Vivian Mordaunt, returning from a long day's parish visiting, and looking hot, weary, and dissatisfied.

His wife, who was no great physiognomist, began eagerly telling him of all she had been doing, and he listened and smiled at her droll, bewitching ways, called her a spoiled child, and seemed well-pleased to see her on such apparently frank and friendly terms with his niece and her friend.

But in all he said there was an under-current of half-conscious dissatisfaction which Florence did not fail to observe.

At last, taking advantage of a pause in the conversation, he said abruptly to Florence—

"Do you remember Widow Cox of the Old Hill Cottage?"

"Whose husband died of the sunstroke last year? Oh yes! I have often heard papa speak of her as one of the most deserving people in the parish. She manages wonderfully to support herself and those four children."

"Yes, till lately, but her eyes have been failing sadly; she has been to the Dispensary about them, and they say it is absolutely necessary she should give up needlework for some months to come, or else run the risk of going blind altogether. Willis, the farmer for whom her husband used to work, has been very kind, and lent a helping hand; so they are not so behind-hand with their rent, but the loss of her needlework does away with one of her principal supports."

"Yes," said Florence, "she worked very neatly. I remember mamma's employing her to make some things for Ada and Maude, when nurse was too busy."

"Well, and one of the things that now troubles her most is, that the children have to be kept away from school, because Johnnie and

Charlotte have no tidy clothes to wear. I thought that was an evil which might perhaps be remedied, though I did not venture to raise Widow Cox's hopes."

"Oh yes!" said Florence, cheerily; "mamma has plenty of prints and stuff by her, and we will soon get some things made up for them."

"I should like to help," said Elsie; and Vivian looked at his wife, evidently hoping to hear a similar proposal from her, but she was playing with the tassel of her parasol, and did not speak, until, drawing her arm within his own, he said, playfully—

"Don't you think, dear, it would be a good opportunity for these idle little fingers to make themselves useful? Suppose you enlist as a volunteer, and take a lesson from your nieces on the duties of a lady in a country parish?"

"*Comme tu m'ennuies!*" she answered, pettishly, withdrawing her hand; then taking off her glove, and looking at her white taper fingers with their load of sparkling rings, she added pathetically, "Indeed, Vivian, I never could do plain work, and I should hate so to see those

ugly needle-marks on my poor little forefinger. Besides, in this hot weather it would be so dreadful to handle that fusty smelling linsey, and stiff slippery lilac print. But if you like to give the poor woman some money for me, dear, do, and she shall have as much more as you like."

And she took her dainty portemonnaie from her pocket, and would have poured its contents into his hand, had he not gently repelled her.

"No, Winnie, not now, my darling. That reckless way of giving is the laziest and most easy salve to a self-indulgent conscience. I hope, ere long, you will understand the difference better between real charity and imitation."

"That she never will," muttered Florence, with considerable bitterness, though fortunately unheard by all but Elsie, who pressed her arm and begged her to have patience.

CHAPTER VII.

THE following Sunday was an eventful one at Fairleigh.

The young rector was to read himself in, and to preach his first sermon at, the pretty village church, and, what I fear the congregation regarded as a far more important incident, the bride was to make her first public appearance in all the glories of trousseau splendour.

In the latter particular they were, however, a little disappointed; for both Winnie and her French maid (literally a Mistress of the Robes) had too much good taste to consider this an occasion for elaborate toilette, and the villagers were too unsophisticated to appreciate the delicate freshness of the mauve and white muslin, and simple white bonnet, made, however, as both were, in the extreme height of the fashion.

The church-had open seats, but in the right-

hand corner were two benches appropriated to the Squire's family, while the Rectory seat immediately fronted the reading-desk.

Of course, on the present occasion, Mrs Mordaunt followed her sister-in-law; and as Mr Ward and the two girls were outside her, we fear the curiosity of the admiring congregation must have been very imperfectly gratified.

To Elsie and Florence it seemed very like the fulfilment of an old dream, to see their friend and uncle actually in the pulpit; and they listened with almost breathless attention to his well-chosen, but somewhat nervously delivered sermon.

His wife, on the contrary, appeared at first restless, then indifferent, and finally so sleepy, that Elsie caught herself looking at her with a mixture of vexation and admiring indulgence, as the long eyelashes drooped more and more over the fair cheek, and the head sought a resting-place against the pillar by which she sat.

There were other eyes, too, which watched the proceeding less leniently; for Mrs Ward could

not easily forgive such a slight to her brother, and Florence was intensely annoyed at the example to the children and parishioners.

However, Mr Ward, on hearing after church some rather severe strictures on the bride's conduct from his wife and daughter, only smiled good-naturedly, and said—

"After all, she is only a child! Plenty of time for fresh impressions and better ones, if only Vivian knows how to set about the work."

"It is hard on a clergyman to have to begin by educating his own wife," observed Mrs Ward.

"He must take the consequences of such a marriage. It may be very good practice for him, who knows; though I confess I don't envy the task."

"I should not care," Florence was in the meantime saying to Elsie, "if only she had more heart. Self, self, self! that seems the sole prevailing idea, and as your uncle also thinks of nothing but her, they have really only one thought between them."

"I think you are a little severe," Elsie again pleaded. "It is so early to judge yet. Per-

haps, when the bridal importance is gone off, she will settle down, and be more steady and practical."

"Impossible, with that face! It sounds horridly ill-natured, but really such beauty is almost a misfortune. It is her all-absorbing thought and occupation."

"Come, I will not have you so uncharitable," said Elsie, lightly. "Are you going to hear the children their collects? And after that we will go and sit under the big walnut, and read Keble. Or if you are going to afternoon church as well as nurse, I will see to the children."

It was a relief to all parties when, in the course of another week, the rectory was pronounced sufficiently habitable for the newly-married couple to take possession of it. True, the drawing-room was still unfinished, but Vivian foresaw that it would be an amusement and occupation for his wife to exert her taste in the various completing touches and arrangement of the wedding presents, and truck-loads of knick-knackeries which were sent down from town.

For occupation, she was in truth rather hard up, since she resolutely persisted in refusing to take part in any useful country avocation; and with the exception of Elsie, none of the Fairleigh party had much time or inclination to indulge her in her favourite pastime of croquet.

There was little gaiety going on at that time in the country, with the exception of a formal dinner-party or two, given chiefly out of curiosity to see the bride, the fame of whose beauty had gone abroad.

Besides this, Mrs Ward was at this time far from strong; and her husband, with all his kindly hospitality, could not but rejoice in the increased quiet of the house, when one bright morning the bride and bridegroom, accompanied by Julie and trunks innumerable, took up their abode definitively at the Rectory. Julie, who had lived for some years with her young mistress, and rather prided herself upon the amount of influence she possessed over Winifred's easy nature, was at first in despair at the smallness of the house,

the limited number of wardrobes (incapable of holding more than half the trousseau dresses), and above all, at the rustic manners and inexperience of poor Maria, who, with the best intentions in the world, was incapable of accomplishing all the work which seemed to be expected of her.

More than this, Julie conceived an ill-natured spite against the poor girl, delighted in magnifying her slight failures into serious faults, and entertained "Madame" (while combing and arranging the golden hair, which it was her pride to dress according to the highest exigencies of "la mode") with such descriptions of her awkwardness, want of memory, and inability to learn, that from sheer indolence, and dislike to being worried with household matters, Winnie resolved to give her up. The climax was reached when she herself, going down to breakfast rather earlier than usual one morning, found Maria in tears over the débris of a beautiful Sèvres vase—one of a pair which had been a wedding present to Winnie.

"If you please, ma'am," said Maria, wiping

her eyes, and curtseying. "I am very, very sorry; but I don't think as it was quite altogether my fault."

"No, of course not," Winnie answered, bitterly. "The vase broke itself, I suppose, or came to pieces in your hand. But this is really too much, I have put up with your awkwardness and forgetfulness for three weeks: now, I can stand it no longer, you go at the end of your month. You may be very well-meaning, I daresay, but it is quite evident that you are incapable of learning to be a good servant; and all the trouble that Julie has taken to teach you has been thrown away. You are fit for nothing but a farmhouse."

"Indeed, ma'am," pleaded Maria, speaking eagerly, and looking straight at her mistress; "indeed, indeed, the vase was broke before, I don't know who done it; but the pieces was just stood up together, and when I moved it to dust, it fell all to bits."

"That is one ver likely story," said a sharp voice at the door. "Ah, you dare try so far to impose on the goodness of Madame! Who

you think would do such senseless thing as to stick all de pieces up together after they were broke. Tell de trut, and say you knock it down, dusting in your rough way. I wonder you dare look Madame in de face, and tell such story!"

"I never tell no stories!" cried poor Maria, now driven to bay, and with her face in a flame and her eyes sparkling. "Ask mother, ask Miss Florence if I do!" But it isn't the first I 've stood by and heard told since I came into this house, and I 'll be right glad in most ways to get out of it—all but the leaving you, ma'am; and I humbly beg your pardon for speaking so," added the girl, with a sudden change of tone, and a glance at her beautiful mistress; whom she had hitherto secretly worshipped at a distance.

"I should think so," said Mrs Mordaunt, who had recovered her dignity and self-possession upon the girl's tones of defiance. "You have reason to apologise for your impertinence, and I have very little doubt that what Julie says is right, and that you are wilfully concealing the truth.

As I do not wish to annoy Mrs Ward by sending you away in disgrace, you may remain until your month is over; after that, the sooner we part the better." And Winnie sailed out of the room without bestowing another glance on the weeping handmaid, and proceeded to give her husband an indignant account of what had passed, and to claim his sympathy in the loss of her poor dear Sèvres vase.

Vivian was like most men, somewhat impatient of small household details, and it is to be feared that his sympathies were rather with Maria of the two.

"Of course you must manage these things for yourself, dear; but it seems rather hard to make the poor girl lose her place for an accident."

"It is not the accident alone," Winnie answered, indignantly; "it is her whole conduct since she came into the house, and then her telling a deliberate untruth. I did not expect, Vivian, to hear *you* defending such a thing."

"You are convinced that it was an untruth, then?"

"Quite certain! The vase was quite intact when I went to bed last night, and no one but Maria goes into that room in the morning."

"What shall you do," said Vivian, after a pause, "about replacing Maria? You will not find it so easy down here as you with your London notions believe, and I should have preferred having a girl whose parents and bringing up one knew something about."

"Then, darling, I have forestalled your wishes," replied his wife, looking up at him with her bright winning smile. "I have arranged it all in my own mind, and you must never call me heedless Winnie, and say I have no forethought again. I mean to go to-day and see Mrs Matthews at the Farm, and ask her to let me have that pretty Jessie, Maria's younger sister, to take the place. She is so bright-looking, and has such a taking manner, I am sure Julie will have no trouble with her. Nay, why not?" as her husband's face fell perceptibly.

He hesitated, looked doubtful, and at last said, "Ina thought her too young."

"Ina expects every one to be as stiff and

proper and particular as herself. No, darling"—as he looked grave—"I didn't mean that—forgive your naughty Winnie—but I have set my heart on this plan. You have been so good in spoiling me, and getting this house so pretty and nice; and all it wants is a pretty maid to open the door. And I would take such pains with Jessie, read with her and everything you like: say 'Yes,' now, Vivian dearest, won't you?" And, as usual, he did say "Yes," though against the dictates of his better judgment.

That very afternoon, Winifred, braving the heat which she had hitherto declared made it *quite* impossible to walk up to the Hall, found her way to Mrs Matthews, and with a little exertion of the same powers of persuasion, succeeded in inducing that good woman to exchange the younger daughter for the elder. Jessie's delight was unbounded, and was only very slightly damped by a grave lecture on her future conduct from Miss Florence, who was not a little annoyed when she learned that the arrangement had been made.

Good-hearted Maria ceased entirely to grieve

over her own disappointment, when she found that Jessie was to be benefited thereby, and only felt a little nervous as to that damsel's possible difficulties in patiently bearing with the sharp-tongued and all-powerful Mamzelle Julie.

Jessie, however, had no such fears; indeed, as the quick-witted Frenchwoman soon found out, her powers of tact and observation were far greater than those of simple Maria, and her conscience less sensitively tender. Many a perquisite with which Julie was lining her own nest, came under the observation of Jessie's innocent blue eyes. The girl had been shocked at first, and had ventured on a timid remonstrance, but had been silenced by a few threats, a good deal of cajolerie, and, above all, a few cleverly-directed appeals to her innate love of finery. How could she betray Mamzelle's little failures in honesty, when the latter so magnanimously sat up till eleven o'clock one night to retrim her bonnet, and restored it to her, looking so bewitchingly new and fashionable, that Jessie scarcely recognised her own face in the glass?

The cook was a London-bred servant, with London ideas of expense and profusion, but a connoisseur in her art, and therefore chosen and sent down by Winifred's aunt, to whom the young couple had applied. She, also, had her own reasons for wishing to keep well with Mademoiselle Julie, and thus things went on very smoothly and comfortably below stairs at the Vicarage.

But in spite of his devotion for his beautiful young wife, and the fascination which she still exercised over him, Vivian Mordaunt could not but feel surprised and somewhat annoyed, when she one morning coolly informed him that it was *quite* impossible to manage her housekeeping with the (very liberal) allowance he had considered sufficient. Nay, she had already exceeded it by so much that she found it impossible to hold out any longer.

"But, my darling Winnie," he remonstrated, "there must be some mistake. Your allowance is ample. Ina manages her large household with very little more."

"Ina, again!" said she, pouting; "I shall

begin to hate the name of your sister if you are always holding her up as such a model of perfection."

"You have no cause," he answered, keeping his temper with some difficulty at this taunt. "But get your books, dear, and let us see if we can unravel this mystery together. I cannot understand it, and fear there must be roguery somewhere."

There was a cloud over Winnie's lovely face, and a tone of deeper pettishness in her manner than her husband had ever observed before, as she unwillingly complied.

He drew a chair to the table, and was soon deep in calculations over the items of a certainly very exorbitant butcher's bill, followed by a grocer's, baker's, &c., proportionately extravagant. Winnie stood by, not offering any assistance, but secretly watching him under her long eyelashes. At last, looking up suddenly, he said—

"My love, it must be as I said; there is dishonesty somewhere. Do you see the things that come to the house yourself, or

leave it entirely to Julie and the cook's discretion?"

"I have no fancy for inspecting raw meat, certainly," she answered, provokingly. "I never understood *that* was included amongst the numerous duties of a clergyman's wife, which you tell me I have yet to learn."

He made no reply for a moment, then handing her a long list of figures which he had just jotted down; he said quietly—

"See, dear, that is the proportion of meat which each person in this house seems on an average to have been consuming every day. I don't think you ever ate more than half as much, and I am quite sure I could not. Then these groceries. The consumption of tea is something perfectly extraordinary. There must be some limit put to this."

"It does seem large, certainly," Winnie said, alarmed as he held the total before her eyes. "But after all," she added, resuming her gay tone, "you are not a poor curate to whom every sixpence is of consequence. And you know long ago I told you I knew nothing of these

tiresome hum-drum things. They always manage themselves somehow at my aunt's."

He shook his head gravely.

"These things *never* manage themselves, as you call it, dearest. They are, if not looked after by the proper authorities, managed, or mismanaged, for them by their subordinates. I am afraid in this instance, it is too plain what has been their line of conduct."

"You don't want to make me think evil of Julie," Winnie cried, indignantly; "my dear clever Julie, who is the comfort of my life, and who makes such adorable little bonnets, which Madame Elise herself might envy. And after all, I daresay some of these extravagances, as you call them, might be accounted for. *Par exemple*—the tea; well, you know we have had the girls here several afternoons, and croquet *does* make one very thirsty, though you may deride it as such a lazy amusement. Then Mrs Stevenson and her daughter came over last Friday, and the children from the Hall yesterday, and Roger has been in to breakfast; so you see"——

"Yes, love; but how many times have we lunched, dined, and had tea at the Hall? You forget that that ought to make a difference. Then these candles—seriously, Winnie, this will not do. It is impossible the servants can require so many at this time of year."

"There do seem to have been a great many used, certainly; but then last week we dined out twice, and went to one dance, and poor Julie sat up *so* late to finish my dress the night before, there was so much to be done to it, and you would not have liked your little Winnie to look shabby, would you, darling?"

But even the vision which she hoped thus to call before his mind, of a floating swelling cloud of snowy tulle, and a graceful head and throat rising out of it, adorned with pearls and water-lilies—a toilette which, in fact, had created a wondrous sensation among the country neighbours, for whom it was improvised, failed at that moment to charm away the disagreeable thoughts which had taken possession of him.

He felt heated, vexed, and thoroughly dissatisfied with the result of his morning's work,

the last work in the world, by the by, calculated to put a man into good-humour; and the young wife might have thought herself very fortunate to escape with no severer rebuke than silence, and an omission of his usual caresses.

He got up and paced the room silently for some time, then merely observed that he had some parish work to attend to, and must go out, and advised his wife not to lose the best part of the day, as it looked like change of weather. He glanced at her wistfully, perhaps hoping that she might depart from her usual rule, and offer to accompany him in his cottage visitations, but she made no attempt to do so; watched him depart without the smallest appearance of interest in his proceedings, and when quite certain that the door was shut, threw herself on the sofa, and, poor foolish child! gave way to a flood of angry tears.

CHAPTER VIII.

"COME with me, Flo; you have only been at the Vicarage once this week, and I know Winnie likes to have us. Do come! you have finished all the children's lessons, and Uncle Roger is going to drive Aunt Ina and Nellie to Collingwood, so you have nothing to keep you."

"Yes, I have. I particularly want to finish that sketch of the church, which I began last week. And Herbert asked me to go fishing with him. There! I may just as well tell the truth. The fact is, Elsie, I don't want to come. The Vicarage atmosphere always puts me in a state of mental irritation."

"But you might try to improve it. I wish you would, dear," continued Elsie, gently. "I am sure you could do Winnie good if you would *only* care about her a little."

"I can't make myself care about a frivolous conceited girl. I was prejudiced against her at first, I own, because I did think your uncle would have married a superior kind of woman; but I could have got over that, if she had shown the smallest desire to improve, or to strive after higher and better things than mere fashion and self-indulgence. Instead of raising herself to his level, she is dragging him down to hers."

"I don't think *that*," replied Elsie, thoughtfully. "He sees her faults quite as plainly as you or I do; but he loves her so much that he cannot bear that others should notice them."

"Then," said Florence, suddenly branching off to another part of the subject; "her treatment of poor Maria. Was ever anything more unjust or harsh? I cannot think how Mrs Matthews could be so weak as to let Jessie take the place. The mere sight of that fine French maid of Winnie's gives me an impression of fawning and insincerity."

"She is very obliging," said Elsie, laughing, "and gave Keith such good advice about the

trimming of my green muslin. There! don't look at me in such sublime indignation. I did not mean to tease you, dearest, and you know I don't really uphold Winnie's household system any more than you do. But good-bye, if you would really rather not come with me."

And with a parting kiss, Elsie tripped lightly down the garden paths, with Jock close at her side; thence into the avenue, and then turned off along the shady lane leading to the Vicarage.

The house looked very pleasant with the sun gilding the ivy leaves, and bringing into bright relief the jessamine stars with which its walls were covered; but its mistress was not on her favourite seat under the great lime-tree, and the Maltese terrier in his blue ribbon sat disconsolately on the door-step, and welcomed Elsie with a noisy demonstration of affection. Leaving him to fraternise with Jock, she passed on through the entrance without ringing, and tapped at the drawing-room door. "Come in!" said a languid voice, and entering, she discovered Winnie on the sofa, her eyes red with evidently

recent tears, and her pretty hair loosened and untidy.

"Oh you dear child, is it you?" and quite revived by the sight of a visitor, Winnie sprang up and kissed her niece impulsively. "How nice of you to come just when I was feeling so lonely and disconsolate. Take off your hat, and we'll have tea presently."

"Where is Uncle Vivian?" asked Elsie, submitting to have her hat and jacket forcibly removed, and herself drawn into a low lounging chair, while Winnie resumed her position on the sofa.

"Oh, somewhere about the parish, looking after his old women. There are a terrible lot of old women here, Elsie. Are there as many in every country parish, I wonder?"

"Why did you not go with him?" Elsie asked, laughing. "It is a lovely afternoon for a walk, not nearly so hot as it has been."

"My dear, I hate cottages, and close rooms, and good talk and twaddle. It is no use to ask me to try and get used to it, and Vivian is be-

ginning to cease to expect it now, I am thankful to say."

Elsie looked grave. It seemed as Florence had said, like the first step towards descending to his wife's worldly level, that he should have ceased to try to interest her in his pursuits.

"I suppose some people like it," continued Winnie, with a yawn; "your Aunt Ina does, and Florence; it is lucky we are not all created alike. By the by, Elsie, I have heard of such a love of a pony-carriage, which I am trying to persuade your uncle to buy for me. He fidgets about the expense, and says he doubts whether a clergyman is justified in spending the greater part of his income on his personal pleasure and comfort; but I tell him that he does *not*—he only spends it on mine, which makes all the difference."

"A piece of sophistry of which he does not see the argument," said Elsie, smiling.

"Heigh-ho! I think money is made to be the plague of one's life. I have had such a disagreeable morning, Elsie, over those horrid weekly books. Your uncle says they are

too high, and I am so stupid about these things. You know"—and the impulsive blue eyes filled with tears—" I have had no mother to teach me right from wrong ; and good-natured as my aunt and cousins were, we seldom talked there of anything more serious than our ball-dresses ; and now it *is* a little hard to expect me to settle down as a sober country parson's wife, as if I had studied it all beforehand."

It *was* hard, and Elsie instinctively felt it, as she answered, " I wish I could help you, dear Winnie, but I am afraid I am not clever or experienced enough. Why don't you ask Aunt Ina ? Or"—as Winnie shook her head impatiently—" how I do wish you would make a friend of Florence ! She is so clever about this kind of thing, and so good. She would be a real friend, firm and strong to lean upon"——

" And," interrupted Winnie, " as hard and cold as a slab of marble. No, no, Elsie, friendship cannot be forced, or dictated to by motives of prudence. I could be very fond of you, little one," and she actually rose from her languid attitude, and, to Elsie's surprise, threw her arms

round the girl's neck, and kissed her several times.

"You don't 'talk good,' you only look and act it, and don't oppress a poor worldly butterfly like me with a sense of your over-weening superiority. Dear, dear! I am afraid I have made a great mistake in life; but it is too late to think of that now."

"It is, indeed," said Elsie, so gravely, that Winnie looked up in surprise.

"There, now! I did not mean to talk treason, but things come into my head and slip out somehow before I have time to stop them."

"How do you like Jessie Matthews?" inquired Elsie, who was glad of an opportunity of changing the conversation.

"Oh, very well. She is a nice bright girl, quick and obliging; an immense improvement on your aunt's pet, poor dear stolid Maria."

"Please," said Elsie, speaking quickly and nervously, "would you mind not encouraging Jessie to dress too smart; I know it is the particular failing that my aunt and Florence have *often* warned her against. I beg your pardon,"

she added, deprecatingly, as Winnie's blue eyes opened in somewhat displeased surprise, "it is very impertinent of me to interfere about one of your servants, but"——

"But you shall say what you please, you sweet little mentor," Winnie interrupted, kissing her affectionately. "I never mind advice given in the pretty way you offer it. What I can't stand, is being dictated to from a high pedestal of superior virtue and sense."

"But Florence would never dream of that," Elsie eagerly explained. "You do not know how really humble-minded—how intensely unselfish she is. She has only such high ideas of duty for herself, even more than for other people, that she is always trying to live up to them."

"Don't let us talk of Florence now," said Winnie, with a little impatient movement. "Do have a little identity, Elsie dear, instead of being merely a patent reflector. Don't you want to lecture me any more on my short-comings in general?"

"No, only to ask whether you would be so

very good as sometimes to read a little with Jessie; because the confirmation is to be in September, and she has never been confirmed yet, because last time her mother thought her too young and giddy."

Winnie threw up her hands in despair. "My dear, this is just what I have been dreading! Another of the parsoness's inflictions! And I know no more how to set about the task than a baby."

"Not peculiar to parsonesses," returned Elsie, laughing. "I think all mistresses of households read with their young maid-servants, preparatory to confirmation."

"Read! that is easily said, but what? A chapter in the Bible every day, till we have gone through it all?"

"Uncle Vivian could tell you," Elsie answered. "Or," she added, hesitatingly; "if you did not mind, I could lend you some books which I read with mamma before my own confirmation!"

"Ah, do! I am sure I should understand things better if you gave me your mother's ex-

planations second-hand. I should like to know your mother, Elsie. What would she think of me, I wonder?"

Elsie smiled as she thought of the contrast between her gentle mother, with her invalid cap and soft patient voice and smile, and the brilliant creature before her, whose moods were as varying as the colours in a kaleidoscope, and whom to connect with the idea of repose seemed an absolute incongruity. Then her eye wandered round the room, from the tumbled chintz cover of the sofa on which Winnie was lying, to the faded flowers in the glasses, and the books and ornaments heaped untidily together upon the centre table.

While she was mentally contrasting all this with the delicate neatness of every arrangement that came under Mrs Campbell's eye, Winnie's quick imagination had followed her thoughts.

"Shockingly untidy, isn't it? But Vivian was out, and when I 'm alone I've no heart to take trouble about anything. Julie will come and put it to rights before dinner."

"Let me do it now," pleaded Elsie, and in-

fected with a little of her energy, Winnie sprang up, and both set to work, and soon succeeded in giving the room a more habitable appearance.

"That is better," said Elsie, approvingly, as she shook out the folds of the muslin curtains, and smoothed the anti-macassar over the large arm-chair. "Now, might I just run out to the garden, and gather a few fresh flowers? These look very deplorable."

Winnie readily assented, and they went out together, soon returning with large handfuls of roses, gorgeous in their luxuriant growth and depth of colouring, a few choice sprays of myrtle and jessamine, and broad-petalled bright-tinted geraniums, contrasting with delicate gray heliotrope.

"I have no taste or knack in arranging them," said Winnie, gazing helplessly at the vase before her, which presented a huddled confused mass of form and colour; while, under Elsie's dexterous touch, each fair blossom and fragrant leaf seemed to stand out in its own grace and beauty.

"You are squeezing them too much," said

Elsie, pausing in her own handiwork; "it is best not to put too many different kinds of flowers together. And don't flatten them down so much at the top. Let the fuchsia hang over the side, and the sweet-pea look as if it were twining up the stem of this tall vase. That is better. No, don't mix the mignionette with the other flowers, it is so much sweeter by itself; only strip the leaves off before putting it in water. Now, that looks lovely. Let me just change these glasses, and put the large frosted one with the white roses in the middle of the crimson cloth, and the little Dresden bowl on the other table. That is perfect; and now, dear, I must run away. See, it is beginning to rain already, and I shall be only home in time to dress. If it sets in for a wet evening, what do you think of a little wood-fire to welcome Uncle Vivian, and make the room look bright? Good-bye"—— And with a hasty kiss and a glance around at the success of her afternoon's handiwork, the "sunbeam" sped away, leaving Winnie once more to solitude, but this time to greater energy of thought and action.

Here came the rain, as Elsie had foretold in good earnest; poor, dear Elsie! she would get wet long before she reached the shelter of the Hall.

And Vivian too—that was a good idea about the fire; for the evening, like so many in summer, when rain sets in after long-continued drought, was growing suddenly chilly. And Winnie rang the bell, and desired Jessie to get some sticks, and light a fire in the drawing-room immediately; the blaze of which was soon crackling merrily, and shedding a ruddy light on walls and furniture.

Winnie next took a survey of her own dress, and finding it rumpled and *chiffonée* from her siesta on the sofa, and recent exertions in the garden, she summoned Julie, and proceeded to array herself in a pretty fresh white muslin, somewhat to the surprise of her handmaid, who generally only expected Madame to dress for strangers.

In the meantime, Vivian (who had been for a regular parish round, and was riding home wet through and somewhat weary and dispirited, as

he recalled the events of the morning) was surprised at the glow of light proceeding from his own drawing-room windows, and still more so, on entering, at the vision of comfort and prettiness, the sweet fresh smell of flowers, and the presiding fairy in her white robes, who sprang to greet him as he opened the door, and stood in his muddy boots and gaiters, uncertain whether he were fit to intrude on so fair a scene.

"So here you are at last, dear," said the musical tones he loved so well. "How wet and tired you must be. See! Elsie said she thought you would like a fire to welcome you. Does it not look cheerful and pleasant?"

"It has been my glow-worm, my beacon-guide of hope all this dull foggy evening," he answered, fondly. "It was a kind thought of yours, my pet. But now I must go and change, and make myself more fit to appear in such dainty company."

He was not long in returning, and they sat down to dinner — the pleasantest *tête-à-tête* meal that either could remember.

But just after it was concluded, and Vivian, still in admiration of the appearance of the drawing-room, was settling himself cosily in his arm-chair, with his pretty wife opposite to him, a message was brought in that there was a "Young woman in the hall, waiting to see master."

"Who can it be at this hour?" asked Winnie, while her husband rose and went out, feeling an uncomfortable presentiment that his enjoyment was to be brought to a sudden close.

In a few minutes he returned. "It is as I feared, Winnie dearest, our pleasant evening together must be interrupted. Old Mary Bailey, the woman I visited yesterday, is worse, and wants to see me without delay."

"Always old women," murmured Winnie, fretfully. "But it is raining so fast, you are not surely going to walk?"

"Why should it hurt me more than the poor girl who has walked all the way here to fetch me? She is so unhappy about her poor old grandmother, Winnie, I wish you would say a kind word to her, while I fetch my coat." And

the young clergyman looked wistfully at his pretty wife, half fancying that a mere glimpse of that fair vision must cheer the poor girl, who was crying in the hall over the prospect of losing her old, half childish, but only remaining, relative.

But Winnie pouted, and felt aggrieved at all the care she had so much prided herself on taking for her husband's comfort, being thrown away.

She said she did not know how to talk to poor people, or to any one in trouble; and Vivian, after trying once more to persuade her, left the room, desired a servant to give poor Sarah Bailey a glass of beer and something to eat, ran up to equip himself in a mackintosh and a pair of thick boots, and was soon trudging briskly along between the damp hedge-rows, without having allowed himself another glance at his own cheerful room, or its presiding fairy.

CHAPTER IX.

A STRONG fit of restlessness, no very unusual occurrence, took possession of Winnie after her husband's departure. How provoking it was, when she had taken such pains to make him comfortable, and there had seemed every prospect of their getting on more happily together. Really the life of a country clergyman was only one degree removed from that of a country doctor. She moved restlessly about the room, spoke sharply to Jessie when the latter asked whether she would wait tea until "master" returned, and finally settled herself in the depths of a large arm-chair, and tried to get up an interest in the third volume of the newest novel on the table.

A ring at the door-bell, however, and a volley of barks from the Maltese terrier, whom it aroused from its slumbers, made her start up once more.

Could that be Vivian returned already? But no; it was a different voice which reached her ear—louder, franker, more youthful in its tones than that of her husband.

In a moment Winifred was out in the hall, with both hands extended.

"Frank! can that possibly be you?"

"No one else, my pretty sister," answered the gay voice, as the young guardsman bent his tall head to salute his sister-in-law, and willingly allowed himself to be led into the drawing-room.

Here a blaze of light showed the handsome bronzed, but still boyishly good-humoured face of Frank Mordaunt, less altered than most of our other acquaintances during the eight years that have passed since we last met him.

"How nice! You are coming to stay, of course? Are they bringing in your luggage?"

"To stay, if you will have me. I've three months leave, and I've portioned out my time very fairly, I consider—viz., a fortnight to you, a fortnight to Ina, if she and Roger like to take me in; a month to fish and recruit my health in

the Highlands, and the remaining month to be divided, as circumstances may indicate, between the Campbells and my father and mother. I suppose by that time the dear old folks will have returned from the tour to the lakes they were frisky enough to undertake."

"Are they there now?"

"Yes; I had a letter from my mother this morning. I am glad she is able to have the change, for no one ever appreciated scenery more; and it has been a trying year for her, hearing of poor Nellie's illness, and feeling herself tied at home by my father's unexpected fit of the gout. By the by, that little Elsie seems to have grown up a marvellous little soul. I hear she managed all the nursing single-handed."

"She is a dear girl," said Winnie, with more warmth than she often expressed, and Frank looked well-pleased at the tribute to his little niece.

"But where 's Vivian all this time?" he suddenly exclaimed. "Fancy my forgetting to ask after the dear old boy."

"Oh, he is very well," the wife answered with slight embarrassment, "but he was sent for to see one of those tiresome old women, who seem to be always ill or something. I do not think he can be very long. But have you dined, or will you have a solid tea, or what? I am famous for my bad housekeeping, you must know; so you must make up your mind to be very uncomfortable while you condescend to remain with us, and then go to Ina's model household for a change."

There was a slight shade of bitterness in her tone, which did not escape Frank's quick ear. He did not, however, affect to notice it, but only answered that he *had* dined, but was quite good for tea, and something substantial after his journey.

Winnie rang the bell, and gave a few directions to Jessie, who simpered and smiled in great satisfaction over a friendly greeting from her old acquaintance Mr Frank.

"Well!" he said, as the door closed, "you have two recommendations for your housekeeping at any rate, a very pretty maid (I always

prophesied that little Jessie would grow up a beauty), and a charming house. Was this room your own furnishing? Really, it does you credit. There is only one thing wanted—there, in that panel between the windows, I should like something—not a picture; you have plenty of pretty water-colours the other side—but an oval looking-glass in an ornamental frame. The paper is just the least bit dark, you know, and a glass such as I mean would lighten the whole effect."

"I know!" cried Winnie, clapping her hands. "It would be the very thing. And I saw such loves at Nosotti's last winter. I will write to Aunt Cecil to send me one down."

"Not without consulting your lord and master, I beg," interposed Frank, good-naturedly, revolving in his own mind whether his own somewhat reckless expenditure would admit of his procuring the wished-for ornament, as a present for his little sister-in-law.

"Oh, Vivian would not mind!" she answered, colouring a little, for she could not bear it to be supposed that her influence over her hus-

band possessed any limits; but just then Jessie re-appeared with the first relay of tea, and the subject dropped.

The new arrival, and the influence of Frank's sunny good-humour, seemed to have put fresh life into Winifred; and when her husband returned wet and tired, after above two hours absence, he was startled by the sound of her gay voice and ringing laugh, as he stood in the hall taking off his outer wraps.

Frank had heard his entrance, and hastened to meet him; and as the two brothers grasped hands, and, Englishmen-like, uttered no greeting except "Well, old fellow!" and "Hulloa, Frank! where do you drop from?" it was easy to see that the old affectionate tie of boyhood had but strengthened with advancing years.

"Well, this is pleasant," said Vivian, as both returned to the drawing-room, and the young clergyman looked with a kind of admiring pride at the soldier figure of his brother, taller and broader than himself by some inches, with the old reckless gladsome light dancing in his eyes, and contrasting with the somewhat aged and

care-worn appearance that had of late come over Vivian.

"You must have arrived just after I went out?"

"Yes, you devoted old parish pastor," said Frank, patting him heartily on the back; and somehow, the light tone jarred somewhat on his brother, after the scene of death and desolation he had lately left, and he answered gravely—

"I was sent for in urgent haste. I am glad Winnie has had so pleasant a companion during my absence."

"She has been telling me all the family news," Frank answered, stealing the while a glance at his sister-in-law, and wondering at the want of *empressement* in her manner since her husband's entrance. "I am sorry not to hear a better account of Ina."

"Yes; she is not by any means so strong as she used to be, and I think Ward looks anxious."

"And Master Herbert is a bigger pickle than ever. Won't I put him up to some mischief while I am in these parts!"

"You had better not," Vivian answered, "for Florence's sake. She undergoes quite misery enough on that urchin's account."

"Ah! my old playfellow Florence! How is she? Grown tall and sedate; but that she always was, and quite a young woman, I suppose?"

"Awfully strong-minded," said Winnie, mischievously; "very clever really, and thinking herself still more so."

"What a contrast to dear little Elsie! I quite look forward to seeing that child to-morrow, and only hope to find her less thin and pale than she was in London."

"Do you know it is any hour of the night?" said Vivian, looking at his watch. "Winnie, my love, you had better go to bed, and I will show Frank his room."

CHAPTER X.

THE guardsman's visit had introduced quite a new element in the quiet life at Fairleigh. Mrs Ward was not well enough to give large dinner-parties, but there was plenty of croquet and five o'clock tea, in which some of the neighbourhood occasionally took a share; and the Vicarage did its part in the way of entertaining, the young hostess acquitting herself with a grace and ease that called forth general admiration.

Vivian enjoyed his brother's society, and it gave him a change of ideas and temporary rest from care, which his wife regarded as a great boon. There were no more discussions on the consumption of candles, or the desirability that a clergyman's wife should visit and do good amongst her husband's flock.

Also, alas! although the time for the Confir-

mation was fast approaching, all question of reading with Jessie was deferred until "a more convenient season."

In the meantime, that damsel's face was losing the happy bright expression which used to be its distinguishing characteristic; and her mother and Maria remarked with pain, that her visits to them became far less frequent, and when they did meet, her manner was more cold and pre-occupied than in former days.

"Is there anything on your mind, dear?" the good sister asked, one day. "You don't look well, and I can't bear to think as anything secret's a vexing you."

But Jessie hastily and nervously disclaimed all cause for care or anxiety, and, to change the subject, took her sister up to see the new cloak which "Mamzelle" had been devising for her, after the fashion of her own.

Maria went home perplexed and uneasy. "Something's wrong with the child," she told her mother, "and though I don't like to say it, I always feel as if that there Mamzelle was at the bottom of it. You know it was she as broke

the china vase, and stuck the pieces together to get me into trouble."

"I say, young ladies," said Frank one morning, as he put his merry face in at the door of Mrs Ward's schoolroom, eliciting a shout of welcome from the children. "Can one or both of you take compassion upon Winnie and me today, and come down to the vicarage? She has had a note to say all the Marshalls are coming over to luncheon, and is in despair. Vivian is safe out of the way, having ridden to a parish meeting, some distance off."

"I'll come," said Elsie. "I am afraid Florence has letters to write for Aunt Ina. Take your slate, Nellie dear; the sum is quite right. You can spare me now, Flo?"

"Oh yes, of course," the latter answered, somewhat ungraciously, for she had a growing jealousy of Elsie's constant visits to the Vicarage.

While the latter went for her hat, Frank sat down, and made the children laugh by pretending to put them through a rigid cross-examina-

tion on their studies, finally presenting each with a prize in the shape of half-a-crown.

"I 'm awfully glad you can come," he said to Elsie, as she tripped along the lane by his side; "to say the truth, things are not very comfortable at the Vicarage this morning, and I expect you can do Winnie more good than most people."

"What is the matter?" asked Elsie, anxiously.

"Why the little goose has been and committed an extravagance for which I feel myself partly responsible, and Vivian has been holding forth on the crime generally, and its peculiar heinousness when indulged in by parson's wives. I blame myself for having given rise to the idea; but if only she had waited I meant to have made her a present of the thing, when I was a little more flush of cash."

"What is it?"

"One of those ornamental oval looking-glasses in a carved frame, for the panel between the windows. It seems Winnie wrote to her aunt to send it down, without having the sense to consult her husband first; and the price is

higher than Vivian approves, especially now that he is hard up, from subscribing pretty liberally to various charities. So Mistress Winnie came in for a matrimonial lecture, and some rather sharp words passed on both sides; and in the middle came this note from old Mrs Marshall, and Vivian ordered his horse, and got out of the way as speedily as possible. I wish," added Frank, in a tone of deeper feeling than he often chose to use, "that I could see things look a little more promising for their happiness!"

Elsie echoed his sigh, and not another word was spoken, till they reached the Vicarage door.

They found Winifred in the drawing-room, with a cloth spread over the carpet, and Jessie and the village carpenter in attendance. The latter was preparing to fix up against the wall the inanimate object of the morning's dispute.

As she came forward to meet her welcome visitor, Elsie thought she had never seen her look more beautiful. There was still a deepened flush on her cheek, and a kind of defiant light sparkling

in her blue eyes, while her voice had in it a harder ring than usual, as she said, "This is very good of you, Elsie. You are just in time to give your opinion on a subject of the utmost importance."

And she pointed to the mirror, which, with clumsy care, the carpenter now took in his arms, and proceeding to mount his steps, held against the wall, at the elevation his own taste considered most correct.

"Too high," said Frank, laconically.

"Yes, a little; and it wants to slope forward more—so—take care," and advancing closer, she put up her own hand to the edge of the frame to show the desired inclination. As she did so, she unconsciously shook the steps; the man staggered, felt himself falling, and, in the instinct of self-preservation, clung to the steps, and relaxed his hold on the heavy looking-glass.

The next moment there was a crash—a scream, then a stunned silence, and Frank and Elsie were lifting from under the ruin of broken glass and gilt carving, the crushed form and face of what, but a moment before, had been so

fair. There was blood on the white dress, and amongst the golden hair; the blue eyes were closed, and a long cruel wound crossed the line of one delicate eye-brow. Was she dead? They almost thought so; but Frank, as he laid her on the sofa, caught the sound of a faint moan. Was it the last? Would his brother never see again alive the fair young wife with whom, not an hour ago, he had parted in anger? While he hung over Winnie, speechless and helpless with the agony of these thoughts, there came a soft touch on his shoulder, and Elsie, motioning him aside, sprinkled some water over Winnie's face, and held a *vinaigrette* to her nostrils.

There was again a slight movement, and a fervent "Thank God" was uttered by the poor carpenter, who had been the innocent cause of the catastrophe.

Elsie turned quickly towards him. "Green, you had better run up to the Hall as quickly as possible, and tell Miss Ward—stay, I 'll write it down." She snatched a pencil and sheet of paper from the writing-table, and wrote—

"DEAR FLO,—There has been an accident, and poor Winnie is hurt; a looking-glass fell upon her, and her head is cut. Send off at once for a doctor. Send my mare back here by Green. Tell Aunt Ina carefully."

Hastily folding this, she put it into the half-stunned carpenter's hand, and once more turned towards the white motionless figure which Frank was watching in the extremity of despair. At this moment the French maid rushed into the room, exclaiming incoherently about "la pauvre Madame;" but the sight of the blood sent her into such violent hysterics, that Frank angrily ordered her out of the room. Jessie was crying helplessly, and the young soldier felt in utter despair in a situation like this, where his own strength seemed of no avail.

"Keep back a little," whispered Elsie, gently; "let her have as much air as possible. Could you open the other window?"

Then she again sprinkled water over the face, and tried to force a few drops between the clenched teeth.

"Poor Vivian—my poor brother," groaned Frank; "who is to tell him?"

"You must," answered Elsie, with the same quiet firmness, yet speaking almost like a person walking in her sleep. "I want you to ride off to meet him, and break it gently, before he hears any dreadful reports. Green will be back directly with 'Brunette.'"

Frank stared at her incredulously. "What! leave you here alone, Elsie?"

"I am not afraid. I have seen mamma faint, you know," was the quiet answer.

"Please tell some one to stop the Marshalls' carriage. We had better keep the house quiet."

Again Winnie stirred, and Elsie, soaking a handkerchief in water, laid it gently across her brow, stroking the golden hair with a tender lingering touch.

"The doctor will soon be here, I think," said Elsie, presently. "Please go, dear Uncle Frank. It will half kill Uncle Vivian if he hears it suddenly from any one else. There is Green *coming* back with the mare."

The carpenter had also brought the following note from Florence—

"DEAREST ELSIE,—I have sent for Dr Mason. I am so grieved. I wish I could come; but mamma has unfortunately heard the bad news suddenly, and it has given her a sad shock. She is too unwell for me to leave her; but I will send the housekeeper, who, I hope, may be of some use. Papa will soon be home, I hope, and will go to you as soon as possible.—Your affect. "F."

"You are *sure* you do not mind being left, Elsie?" said her uncle, still lingering; for to say truth, his heart quailed at the task before him.

"No, oh, no! Please start. He may be already returning."

Frank cast another look at the motionless figure, and strode away, and Elsie was left to her melancholy watch.

Greatly was she relieved by the entrance of Mrs Simmes, the housekeeper from the Hall,

a middle-aged sensible woman, who, though she did not originate much, proved herself very useful in carrying out the directions of her young instructress, and at least inspired the poor girl with confidence by her very presence.

The doctor, too, arrived before long, and succeeded in administering stimulants stronger than Elsie had ventured to attempt, under the influence of which the blue eyes once more unclosed, and the voice, to Elsie's inexpressible joy, murmured her own name.

"Thank God," said the doctor; but he drew Elsie back, and cautioned her not to betray any agitation. He then bound up the wounds on the head, observing that there was reason to hope the concussion had not been very severe.

At this moment steps were heard, and Vivian, looking an older man by ten years than when he had ridden away that bright morning, crept into the room, and threw himself on the ground beside his wife.

She evidently knew him, but there was no expression of pleasure in the recognition; nay, so heavy a look of care oppressed her brow, that

the doctor hastily implored him to withdraw, repeating that the least excitement might prove fatal.

With a look of broken-hearted submission, Vivian complied, turning his hopeless gaze towards his brother, who had softly followed him into the room. In a moment Frank's strong young arm was round his neck. It seemed as if they were boys together once more, each closely sharing the other's every joy and grief; and leaning his head on that kind shoulder, the elder brother gave way to the agony with which his heart had been almost bursting. Very gently, yet with the quiet authority that such moments demand, Frank led him from the room, and then spoke to him in more cheery accents than perhaps he himself quite believed.

"Dear old boy, keep up heart. The doctor says she's quite likely to do well. I say, are there any of her own people you'd like to send for? I only mean to help with the nursing. What about that aunt she talks of?"

"An intolerable woman in a sick-room," Vivian answered, impatiently. "Good-natured

enough, but all nerves and nonsense, and such a talker."

"Keep her away, then, by all means. Oh! you 'll do well enough with little Elsie, who is worth her weight in gold for pluck and readiness, and Ina at hand"——

But even while he spoke arrived Mr Ward, whose care-worn face betrayed anxiety on his own account as well as that of his brother-in-law, deeply as he sympathised in the latter's grief. Whenever the doctor could be spared he would be glad if they would send him to the Hall. For that night a new little life awoke at Fairleigh, but the bells did not ring as on previous occasions, and (except little Herbert, who shouted for joy on hearing he had a new little brother, and declared he had been *so* tired of only girls) few rejoiced in its arrival; for the sorrow at the Hall was like that of the Vicarage, since in each its mistress lay hovering at the very point of death.

"You will not leave her to-night," Vivian had said, imploringly, seeing how, in her half-returning consciousness, his wife had clung more to

Elsie than to any one else: and Elsie had promised to remain not that night only, but as many more as she might be required. She had no fear of her own strength not holding out; God had always given just as much as she needed for the moment, and Elsie's simple faith knew there was no need to look beyond.

CHAPTER XI.

WILLOWFIELDS, *August* 3.

"MY DARLING CHILD,—I need not tell you how grieved we are at your sad tidings, or how earnestly we look for the next accounts. It seems hardly possible to imagine that bright creature prostrate and helpless; poor Aunt Ina, too. The troubles press *very* heavily just now—God give us strength to bear them; and may He comfort and support your dear uncles. I feel it hard to be only a helpless burden, instead of going to take my share in the nursing; but as papa says, it is useless for me even to think of it, in my present weak state. I cannot bear to think of all that must fall upon you, dearest, though I know by experience what a nurse my Elsie is. Only do not overtax your strength; I am sending your dear old Bonny, I think she may be a comfort to dear Winnie, and she is

invaluable in a sick-room. You can let Keith return here instead. I am so thankful Frank is at hand. He is such a good kind warm-hearted fellow, and his hopeful spirits will cheer his brother. Give my love to poor Florence. I think so much of you both, you poor young nurses in your heavy trials. Of course, since dear Vivian wishes it, and the poor invalid herself so clings to you, you must remain for the present; but my darling, for your father's and mother's sake, be careful of yourself. I have told Bonny to look well after you. Write just a line as often as possible. Flo is very good in sending me bulletins from the Hall. God bless you, my child.—Ever your loving mother.

"Papa's best love."

"What news from the Hall?" asked Elsie, in a whisper, as Frank entered while she was reading the last words.

"Better. Ina was asleep when I got there, and Roger looked in better spirits, and said the doctor spoke much more cheerfully."

"The baby continues well?"

"Oh yes, and Mrs Stevenson had good-naturedly driven over, and carried off all the other children, except Herbert; so poor Florence has one set of cares off her mind."

"Won't Herbert be lonely without his playfellows?"

"May-be; but nothing would induce him to leave his father and mother; and really I am thankful, for Roger would miss him awfully. He is a fine little fellow! But what news here?"

And Frank nodded in the direction of Winifred's room. Elsie shook her head sorrowfully.

"Not much change. I think she is just conscious, and she moans at intervals. Dr Mason said, however, there was less fever than yesterday."

"Vivian there?"

"Yes. I wish we could get him to take a little rest, or go out in the air. He has been up all night, and looks so tired."

"We shall be having *him* to nurse next. I say, Elsie, just creep in, like a mouse as you are, and tell him I want to speak to him."

Vivian came out, looking ghastly, and was at

first inclined to resent the kindly officiousness with which his brother insisted on his coming for a turn in the open air.

"I met some of your parishioners this morning," Frank said, when Vivian, too languid to resist long, had suffered himself to be coaxed into the garden, where the bright sunshine, the sweet-scented flowers, and never-ceasing song of the birds, seemed almost a cruel mockery of the misery within, "and had to answer plenty of friendly inquiries in your behalf. You have managed to make yourself popular here, old man, and no mistake."

Vivian turned away as if the cheery tone grated painfully on his ear; and Frank, drawing his arm within his own, said affectionately—

"Dear old boy, you know I 'd give my right hand to be able to help you, but no one on *earth* can do that. It 's not for a wild fellow like me to be preaching to *you*, a clergyman; but there 's nothing for it, but to wait and trust in God, and show what patience and pluck we can."

The simple words somehow broke through the barrier of Vivian's reserve. Covering his face

with his hands, he groaned out, "If I had only made her happier!"

"Come now," said Frank, with a pretence at roughness, which yet was anything but unkind; "I am not going to stand this sort of nonsense. You 've sat up all night, and worried and fretted (and I don't wonder at it) till you 've made yourself believe all kinds of morbid fancies. No, you 're not going in yet. Elsie is with her, and you could not have a better nurse. Take another turn under the trees, and then you must have a glass of wine and something to eat before you go back to your post."

Slowly and sadly in both houses the next ten days passed away; but by that time all pressing anxiety was over at the Hall, while over the Vicarage the cloud still brooded darkly.

The first moment that she could be spared from her step-mother's side, Florence had hurried thither, and had entreated for just one glimpse of the poor wounded face which she had regarded with almost dislike in the days of its *bright* loveliness.

She was not recognised, and crept away with a heavier weight at her heart than before. Should Winnie die, how could she bear to look back on her own feelings of only a fortnight ago? How she longed to change consciences with Elsie, who in her simple desire to do her duty as well as possible, had day after day shown some kindness to the young gay thoughtless creature, and thus obtained such a hold upon her affections.

One evening as Elsie, who since her old nurse's arrival had only been allowed a very small share in the night vigils, was sitting in the sick-room, she was startled by a faint voice calling her name.

"Has he left me?" the weak accents asked. "I was afraid he would. I was such a bad wife —such a hindrance and stumbling-block in his way—he will be far better and happier without poor foolish Winnie. But I should like him to say he forgave me first."

"I will call him, dearest," Elsie whispered. "He is not far off, only in his own room."

"Ah no! He is busy writing his sermon,

perhaps, and he used to say I disturbed him. O Elsie! I'm so tired. I should not mind dying, if it were only going to sleep and rest; but 'tis all so dark."

"It is better than rest, darling," Elsie answered, bending tenderly over her. "It is waking up to joy and life for those who love Jesus."

"But not for me, for such as I am, who have lived like a butterfly, just to get what pleasure I could out of the world. O Elsie! how can there be mercy for me?"

"God's mercy is all-powerful, dearest; and our Saviour is ready and willing to accept all who come to Him, even at the eleventh hour. Don't you remember the thief on the cross?"

"Read it," whispered Winnie, faintly; and she lay silent while Elsie read the words that have ere now conveyed comfort to many a hopeless dying bed.

But when she ceased, the wailing voice broke forth again; "If ever I do get better, I shall be nothing but the wreck of my old self! The *world* would not think me worth caring for,

and would God accept such a miserable remnant?"

"'A broken and contrite heart He will not despise,'" Elsie whispered. "Darling, let me call Uncle Vivian, he is a clergyman, he will know better how to comfort you than any one else."

Without waiting for an answer, she gently laid back on the pillow the head that had hitherto been lying on her own shoulder, and flew down-stairs to the room, where, with candles burnt low in their sockets, disordered papers, and everything speaking of hopeless, helpless distress, her uncle sat leaning his weary head upon his hands.

"Please come to Winnie," she said, breathlessly, but Vivian had not heard the light footstep, and started violently at the words.

"God help me! Is it coming after all? Is she worse?"

"No, no! I hope not—I think not—but she is talking more, and I thought"——

No need to add more. He was already half-way up the stairs, and had his hand on his

wife's door, before Elsie could caution him to be quiet and careful.

"Is that you, Vivian?" the weak voice asked; then as she felt his kisses on her face and hands, "If I had lived I would have tried to be a better wife, and not to have hindered you in your great work! I would indeed; but I don't think now I shall get well, my strength is all gone—oh, it is so dark! Elsie said you would comfort me."

And he did comfort her, in that darkened hour of his life, when the sunshine seemed about to be hidden for ever, words and wisdom were vouchsafed to him, such as he had never known, when called on before to deliver God's message beside a bed of sickness.

Presently Elsie, creeping to the door before obeying Bonny's peremptory summons to be undressed, could hear her uncle's low deep tones reading aloud the twenty-third psalm, and when two hours later he came out to allow Bonny to take her share in the night-watch, Winnie had fallen into a deep sleep.

From that evening she seemed to improve, and

the doctor now spoke hopefully of her ultimate recovery, though he said it would be a long business, owing to the shock to the nervous system.

But the natural buoyancy of her spirits began to reassert itself with returning strength, and she soon enjoyed being propped up in bed for an hour or two, with her sick-room arranged with all the delicate neatness that Elsie's refined taste, and Elsie's dainty fingers, could accomplish.

It was a pretty room too, with its pink paper, and rosebud-patterned chintz, and the drawings on the walls, and the little table which always stood by Winnie's side, with its vase containing three flowers, varied every day, and small ornamental basket of fruit—rich purple grapes, and downy peaches from the forcing-houses at the Hall, or piles of scarlet and white currants, and giant gooseberries, gathered by Vivian's own hand for his darling.

"I do so wish I had your art in arranging an invalid's room," said Florence one day, when, for a wonder, the two girls found themselves for a few minutes alone together. "Try as I

will, I cannot get mamma's room to look like you make Winnie's."

"It is a larger room, and more difficult to arrange, perhaps. But Aunt Ina hopes to be down soon?"

"Yes, she talks of it for to-morrow; and we are to have the dear children home on Monday. You cannot think how I have missed them, since the first pressing anxiety was over. How much better *your* patient looks too, and how sweet and gentle she is grown."

"Yes indeed. O Flossy, there is so much to be thankful for!"

And for a few moments both young girls were silent, from an intensity of feeling of which neither could speak.

Presently Elsie began in a different tone—"One thing troubles me dreadfully, and I don't like to worry Uncle Vivian about it, or see my way to its being set right. I am perfectly convinced there is some dishonest person in the house!"

"Elsie, you don't mean it! What makes you *think* so?"

"A great many little things. You know since Winnie's illness, I have been keeping house; but I have not had time to look into things much. Still I am convinced that sugar, candles, &c., go a great deal faster than they ought."

"And you have no clue?"

"No, I think Bonny suspects some one, but she will not commit herself even to me, as long as it is matter of uncertainty."

"Have you told any one else?"

"Only Uncle Frank. He laughed at me, called me a little old fidget, and said I wanted to be everything at once, nurse and housekeeper combined in one; but I think he believes something is wrong."

"It is horrid suspecting," said Florence, vehemently: "and to think of poor dear Jessie."

The sound of a sobbing voice in the next room made her break off suddenly. It was that of Jessie Matthews, and she was evidently in the utmost distress. Then they heard a man's tone replying sternly, and the sobbing was redoubled.

The two girls looked at each other in dismay, for the second voice was that of Frank Mordaunt. The next moment the door between the two rooms opened, and Frank stalked in, looking very indignant, while in the background they caught a glimpse of Jessie sobbing behind her apron.

"What is it?" asked Elsie, while Florence stood too much dismayed to speak.

"I suspect the murder is out," Frank said, shutting the door. "Do you remember being called away to Winnie this morning, and leaving the key of the tea-chest in the lock? Well, you know I am in the habit of taking my daily constitutional about this time, but to-day Vivian said if I would wait till he had finished reading to Winnie, he would come with me. I accordingly strolled out into the garden first, and getting tired of that, came back into this room, through the open window, to read the paper. You may guess my surprise on finding the unlucky tea-chest being rifled of its contents by that pretty baby-faced girl, *your* village pet, Miss Florence! *As the* window was open, and my sick-room

experience has taught me to tread pretty lightly, she never heard me until I was close upon her; and then you *should* have seen the start she gave! There was no use in attempting denial: there she was, caught in the act of marauding; but she made a wonderful scene of tears and protestations, of which I remained a perfectly unmoved spectator. And now, what is to be done?"

"I *cannot* think that Jessie would be so wicked on her own account," said Florence, in a low, shaken voice. "Some one else must have bribed or intimidated her into stealing."

"I know who you are thinking of," replied Elsie. "But would it not be best for us to send for Jessie, and question her at once? She cannot, as Uncle Frank says, attempt denial now, and we may learn the truth."

"Then, having performed my part of policeman, I leave you to do the rest," said Frank, walking off. "I don't think I 'll say anything to Vivian till the whole is cleared up."

Elsie rang the bell, which was answered by Jessie, with tear-stained face, and a look of such

misery, that the two girls could hardly help pitying her.

A few questions elicited the whole: indeed, the girl was thankful to free her mind from the burden of a long-continued course of deceit and dishonesty which, especially since her mistress's illness, had weighed heavily on her mind.

It was as Florence suspected; a long system of small peculations, carried on under the very eye of a careless and indulgent mistress, had encouraged the French maid to acts of more overt dishonesty. She had made Jessie her tool in the latter, hoping thus to escape detection, and had bribed the girl by ministering occasionally to her love of finery, or frightened her into obedience by hints of her own influence over Mrs Mordaunt, and her power to make Jessie lose her place in the same manner as her elder sister.

All this confession was poured out between tears and sobs, and ended with, "O Miss Florence! *won't* you speak for me? I am so sorry; I am sure 'twill be a lesson to me for life."

But Florence was too grieved and shocked at her favourite's conduct to utter a word, and it was left to Elsie to tell the unhappy girl that they pitied her, but that the matter was too serious for any one but Mr Mordaunt to decide.

"Poor Winnie!" she said, sorrowfully, as Jessie left the room in tears, "this will be another grief to her, for she will look on it as the result of her own carelessness. But it is dreadful to think of that Frenchwoman's wickedness, so long and secretly carried on! Her making poor Winnie her dupe, and Jessie her tool in dishonesty. I noticed that Bonny could not bear her, but I thought that might be her old-fashioned prejudice against foreigners."

"Will Winnie fret very much over losing her, do you think?"

"No. I fancy in some ways it may be rather a relief; for since she has been ill, Julie has been very little with her. In fact, she is so noisy and awkward in a sick-room, that Bonny and I were glad to keep her away as much as possible."

Vivian's indignation and distress at learning

the extent to which crime and dishonesty had long been carried on beneath his roof, were very great.

With the unhappy Julie there was, of course, but one mode of dealing, as, for his wife's sake, he shrank from exposing her conduct. He accordingly paid her her wages, and dismissed her the same day, protesting vehemently, and turning quite a deaf ear to his earnest exhortation to repent of the past, and begin a better life.

Jessie's case required more consideration.

Her mistress, from whom it had been impossible to keep the transaction secret, was deeply grieved at her own share in the responsibility of allowing so young a girl to be led astray, and very anxious that she might be suffered to retain her place, and trained to better things under the steady English lady's-maid whom Mr Ward recommended. But Vivian inclined to the opinion that Jessie would be safer at home under her mother's eye; and Florence, though unwilling to oppose Winnie, could not help feeling *that* he was right.

"Well, then," said Winnie, who had meekly acquiesced in the decision, "let us have poor Maria back; that is, if she will come. We owe the family some reparation, and I will try to be a less unfair and harsh mistress."

This plan was accordingly carried out, after a little opposition at first from good simple-hearted Maria, who could not bear to be the gainer by her sister's disgrace.

CHAPTER XII.

A LARGE, but scarcely a merry party were assembled around the breakfast table at the Vicarage, one soft still September morning, about seven weeks after Winifred's accident. The invalid herself, whose returning colour and slowly increasing strength were beginning to give her a right to discard the name, was lying on the sofa a little apart, being waited on by her husband, and keeping her somewhat tearful glance fixed on the little figure in travelling dress, whom Florence and the Hall children were endeavouring to tempt with various delicacies. For this was Cousin Elsie's last morning at Fairleigh, and deep, if not loud were the lamentations over her departure.

"Cousin Elsie, couldn't you eat another egg? Cousin Elsie, just try this little bit of hot toast. *Sister* buttered it for you herself. Oh dear!"

(and this was the signal for the chorus to recommence), "what *are* we to do when Cousin Elsie is gone?"

"Come now," said Frank, in an injured tone, "I've heard that till I'm tired of it! And nobody takes the trouble to express any regret over *my* departure."

"Yes we do! yes we do!" cried Herbert, throwing himself boisterously upon his uncle, and "yes we do" echoed the softer tones from the sofa, with a kind glance towards the good brother, whose presence had been often felt to be such a comfort.

"There will be nobody to find out pretty things for us, when Cousin Elsie is gone," sighed Nellie, dolorously.

"Then you must try how many new ones you can discover for yourselves, and write and tell me all about them," said Elsie, cheerily, with an arm round as many little cousins as it could endeavour to encircle.

"But it's the wrong time of year," said Ada. "The flowers are nearly over, and there is not much else."

"Did you never hear of shining clusters of ripe blackberries? and scarlet hips and haws, and long wreaths of feathery 'traveller's joy,' and nice smooth white mushrooms with pink linings? And a little later, of leaves glowing with every colour, from gold to crimson? nor of brown hazel-nuts, which Master Bertie must climb to reach for you, and hedges festooned with beautiful bryony-berries, which Maude must never touch, because they are considered poison?"

"Yes, yes!" cried the children, clapping their hands, "we know! we'll find the pretty things, and write and tell Cousin Elsie."

"Heigh-ho!" said Frank, walking to the window, "to think of spending a day like this stuffed up in a railway-carriage! It's a positive injury to the partridges. However, Miss Elsie, if the fates have decreed that we *are* to go, it is time to think of putting the finishing stroke."

Elsie ran up to her own room, and Florence followed for a few last words.

"I must leave you to Winnie afterwards,"

she said, "but Elsie, my own sister-friend, you must let me thank you this once for all the good you have done. No, don't interrupt and disclaim—you could not help it, I know; it is only the influence of your good sweet gentle nature, but one feels it everywhere, even amongst the children; Nellie is far less pert, and Ada better-tempered, and *I* am at least trying to learn to copy your patience and sympathy with them."

Down-stairs Winnie's outstretched hands and glistening eyes told the same tale.

"Darling Elsie, I 'm not going to try and thank you, nor to be selfish enough to say how I shall miss you."

"But you will write sometimes? And Uncle Vivian must let me know exactly how you are. And as soon as you are strong enough, remember you are to come to see us at Willowfields, and learn to know mamma, your own sister, Winnie! you will love her so much."

"The said mamma will watch for our arrival this evening in vain, if you delay any longer," said Frank, bustling in. "Out of the way, small fry! Now, Elsie dear, one kiss all round,

and be quick! Good-bye, Winnie, make haste and get fat, and have your pink cheeks again by the time we meet. Good-bye, old man! Take care of yourself and your wife, for my sake, mind."

And so, with a good-natured boisterousness, which warded off all violent demonstrations of grief, Frank hurried his niece into the hall, when, just when the last close embrace was passing between her and Florence, Mr Ward arrived at the door.

"Just in time! That's right. I could not be happy without one more glimpse at little Elsie, though we had said good-bye last night. Here's a little basket of grapes which your aunt sent with her love. Tell your father and mother we don't mind having you back whenever they are tired of you, and you owe us another visit, as Vivian has had the lion's share this time. Good-bye, Frank! God bless you, little one!"

And amid a chorus of "good-byes" the carriage drives away, and Elsie's sunbeam smile shines out through her tears, as the loving words

echo in her heart, and she thinks of the meeting in store for her this evening.

But we must not follow her through the homeward journey, for our place is rather with the watchers at the window, who, long after the carriage has disappeared from view, still linger to talk sadly of little Elsie's departure.

May I hope that my readers, in bidding her a last good-bye, feel some little share in their regret?

THE END.

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